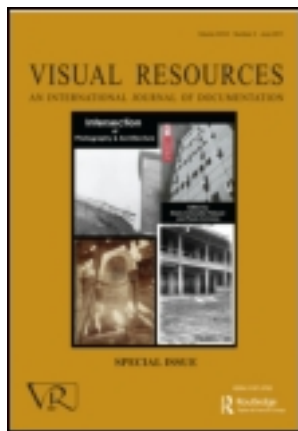


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“It’s Not an Archive”: Christian Boltanski’s *Les Archives de C. B., 1965–1988*

Kate Palmer Albers

In 1988, French artist Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) created *Les Archives de C. B. 1965–1988*, a monumental collection of over 2,000 photographs, letters, and other personal and professional documents, displayed in a way that simultaneously invites and refuses interest. In assembling these documents of his life, accumulated over the course of more than two decades into a personal archive made semipublic, Boltanski, I argue, questions the fundamental ability of such records—photographic or otherwise—to reveal a story of the past. From personal snapshots to professional photographic documentation of his artwork, photographs play a crucial role in his skepticism of biographical and historical reconstruction. Boltanski’s project anticipates our contemporary fascination and obsession with the total archive and illustrates the folly of that enterprise.

Keywords: Boltanski, Christian (b. 1944); Archives; Photography; Collecting; Biography

In January 1989, Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) presented *Les Archives de C. B. 1965–1988* at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot in Paris (Figure 1). The monumental work filled the upstairs gallery exhibition space and was soon purchased by the Musée National d’Art Moderne (MNAM) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris on the recommendation of their curator of contemporary art Bernard Blistène.¹ In this project, Boltanski revisited his fascination with the idea of *saving everything*. The project clarified the artist’s career-spanning questions of information retrieval and preservation, while engaging with his own place in art history through a teasing dialogue with his audience.

In the postwar generation, the concept of the archive has inspired artists as diverse as Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Robert Smithson (1938–1973), Douglas Huebler (1924–1997), Hanne Darboven (1941–2009), Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), Joan Foncuberta (b. 1955), Joachim Schmid (b. 1955), Susan Meiselas (b. 1948), Fred Wilson (b. 1954), Zoe Leonard (b. 1961) and Cheryl Dunye (b. 1966), Walid Ra’ad (b. 1967), and others. Though artists and theorists began investigating archival systems in the 1960s, the past decade and a half have seen a sharp uptick in curatorial and scholarly investigation of the role and function of the photographic archive in contemporary culture and artistic practice.²

Boltanski’s work has been a mainstay of this dialogue. Both the artist’s popularity and his critical reputation, particularly in the United States, rest largely on a body of work that he began in 1985, the series *Monuments*, as well as his *Reserves* series,



Figure 1 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B., 1965–1988*, 1989, installed at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, 1989. Mixed media, 270 × 693 × 35.5 cm. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, France. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot.

from slightly later³ (Figure 2). Installations of blurry photographs of anonymous faces—often children—are enlarged and presented most frequently with candles or electric lights and arrangements of tin biscuit boxes. Commentators were quick to point out associations with the Holocaust, though this is a connection that Boltanski himself did not endorse at the time. The installations in this period are frequently compared to shrines or memorials and evoke a generalized feeling of loss, sorrow, and absence. In *Monuments*, Boltanski’s core strategic methods of incorporating blur, mass quantity, anonymity, and ambiguity, and his much-discussed “obsessions” with death, childhood, memory, and loss, are evident.⁴

This prevailing mode of understanding Boltanski’s artistic career, as intertwined with death, loss, and the Holocaust, builds on—but more often obscures—earlier interpretive frames engaged with the reconstitution of biography through personal archiving systems. Boltanski’s first artist’s book, *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950*, published in Paris as mail art in 1969, launched this line of inquiry.⁵ The small book purported to record “all that remained” of the artist’s life through age six, though it later emerged that much of the material was fictional. The book demonstrated Boltanski’s interest in the storage and retrieval of photographic information and his deeply urgent sense of preservation coupled with a profound skepticism of this pursuit, and furthermore instituted a relationship with his audience that was at once eagerly sought and deeply evasive.

The year 1969 also marked the publication of Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Working in Paris, like Boltanski, Foucault’s writings launched the current critical interest in the role and function of archives. For Foucault, archives are neither the physical accumulations of documents and data that individuals and societies store nor are they the buildings that house those collections. Rather, the archive refers to the system of statements and network of events that combine to create

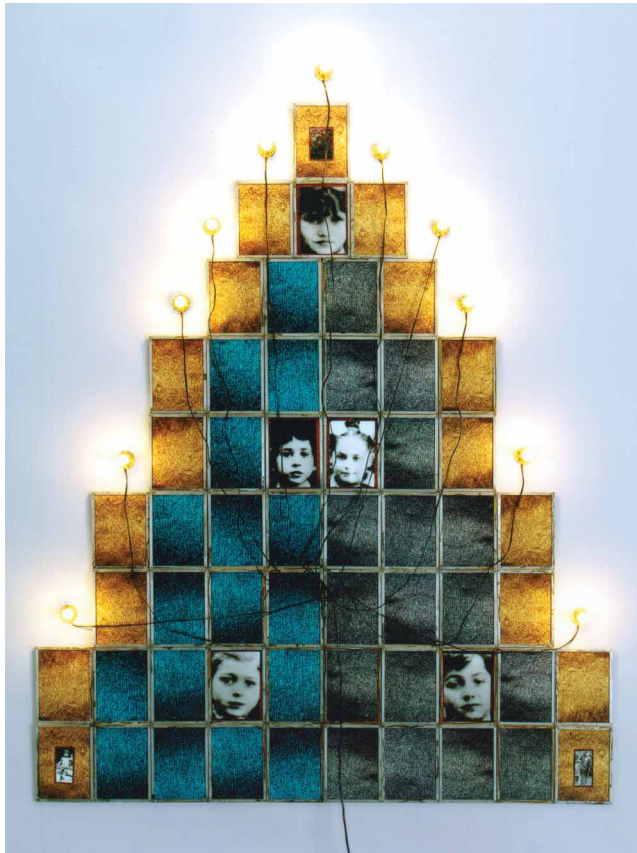


Figure 2 Christian Boltanski, *Monument*, 1986. Black-and-white photographs, light bulbs, wire, 77 × 59 in. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris.

any historical moment; it forms a historical a priori on which our current statements are predicated and through which they are defined and made possible. Foucault eloquently describes his concept of the archive as “the border of time that surrounds our presence...it is that which, outside ourselves, limits us.”⁶ As such, the archive can never be described exhaustively and is never complete; it necessarily emerges only in fragments. Although distillations of Foucault’s discussion have fueled over four decades of critical inquiry into the nature of archives, subsequent interpreters have largely glossed over his proposal that the archive refers not to any actual material manifestation of papers, photographs, or other historical collections but rather to a larger system outside of ourselves that shapes and determines our own systems of discourse. But this entry into the concept of an archive—rather than its material manifestation—is useful in considering how Boltanski points to an archive as a framing structure, a conceptual apparatus that precedes his own subjectivity. As we will see with *Les Archives de C. B.*, Boltanski’s “archive” directs us and simultaneously produces and constrains our understanding. Our engagement with this form, as Boltanski aestheticizes it, enacts the interpretive process of historical reconstruction in a self-conscious way.

Twenty years after he produced *Recherche et presentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950* (1969), Boltanski continued to be fueled by the same basic aesthetic ingredients, but had catapulted to an international stage and thus had the resources with *Les Archives de C. B., 1965–1988* to redirect his concerns from the relatively compact and personal photo album format to the more unwieldy archive. In *Les Archives de C. B.*, Boltanski institutionalized a large portion of his archives of photography and text documents from the years 1965–1988, but aestheticized it into an artwork, thus limiting research access and directly challenging the art historian's impulse. He continued this archival endeavor with *La Vie Impossible* (2001), a project that reverses the invisibility of *Les Archives de C. B.*, but ultimately meets the same goals as both earlier projects.⁷ Spanning over thirty years, from 1969–2001, each of these projects is a touchstone along the arc of Boltanski's career that collects—and indeed constructs—the lifetime detritus of the artist, operating seemingly outside his more generalized evocations of loss and memorial. Through their autobiographical specificity, these projects demonstrate the artist's ongoing compulsion to attend to the problem of “saving everything” while simultaneously underscoring that it is only retroactively that we can produce a narrative.

Comprised as it is of tin boxes under lights, *Les Archives de C. B.* does not offer much at first take, resisting a casual reading.⁸ The MNAM, in its own catalog of acquisitions made from 1986–1996, describes the piece as, “a résumé of all his work and all his life.”⁹ It is, however, essentially an invisible résumé. The fullest description and analysis of the work comes from Lynn Gumpert's 1996 monograph on the artist, where she neatly summarizes the complexity of the work, writing,

Boltanski had removed from his life and his studio years of accumulated clutter, shuffling his past into the boxes and out of sight, both from himself and from his audience. Once again, though, his irrepressibly ambivalent and contradictory spirit was in evidence. True, the papers and ephemera were saved in an archive, but lacking any index or order, it is, practically speaking, unusable.¹⁰

There is, however, much more that can be said about *Les Archives de C. B.* To begin, it is a piece whose meaning rests fundamentally on its description. *Les Archives de C. B.* is comprised of 646 biscuit boxes, rusted to varying degrees and stacked against a wall, illuminated from above by a row of electric lights, with black cords dangling in front of the stacks of boxes and casting linear shadows across the rows. The tin boxes are closed and they bear no labels. Each box rests on another's closed lid, and those high on the top row support the electric lights, thus inaccessibility is built in to their design and presentation. The work teases the viewer, and particularly the scholarly one: twenty-three years worth of archival material, safely ensconced in a museum's care, but rendered inaccessible.

If viewers had been presented with 646 closed biscuit boxes with no external markings and no title, their response might be indifference, or at most a formal reading tracing the rust of the uniformly geometric and industrially produced tins to a minimalist precedent: a rickety, weathered, readymade take on Donald Judd.¹¹ But, we are

told in the title itself that these boxes are the artist's archives and we are thus compelled to wonder about their unseen contents.

Looking In

The usual object description of the work states that the biscuit boxes contain about 1,200 photographs and 800 documents. Intriguingly, the MNAM curators, in the most recent exhibition of the piece (2005), wrote that the boxes were *said to contain* the objects listed above, not that they actually *did*.¹² Curators thus left open the question of whether or not the boxes actually held the stated material. This open-ended phrasing was necessary because, as I later learned, no one at the museum had yet opened the boxes, and no catalog of their contents existed.¹³ And for any visitor, it would remain unknown. While on display, though the boxes are sealed only by gravity, they are stacked high, and ultimately out of reach. And certainly, even if they were stacked at more approachable heights, museum protocol forbids us from touching any of the boxes, let alone opening and disrupting their contents.

In our first conversation about the work, Boltanski said that he would not tell what the photos and documents were about if the boxes were to be opened.¹⁴ There is no formal agreement with the museum about researchers opening the boxes, but there is, however, a practical challenge: the 646 boxes usually are stored off-site, difficult to access not only for researchers but for the staff as well. Yet in the work's 2005 exhibition at the MNAM (Figure 3), only 624 boxes fit comfortably into the space designated for the piece, leaving twenty-two boxes in on-site storage at the museum. This circumstance created an unusual moment of accessibility that allowed me to investigate their contents, while at the same time it raised ethical questions regarding the fundamental meaning of the piece.¹⁵



Figure 3 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B., 1965–1988, 1989*, installed at Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 2006. Mixed media, dimensions variable; each box 12 × 23 × 21.5 cm. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Kate Palmer Albers.

Should one look inside, even though every aspect of the work's presentation suggests that this impulse be stifled?¹⁶ If special access can be gained, is the curator or art historian the only one allowed to “know” the archival Boltanski? Or is *not knowing* a crucial part of the piece? This is a suggestion that Boltanski has endorsed: “It’s the idea...it’s not to look at them.”¹⁷ With this problem in mind, I issue a spoiler alert here: given the chance, I looked. And ultimately, like so many of Boltanski’s claims, his initially professed stance that he would not discuss specific images within the boxes if they were opened became yet another—presumably strategic—move in the developing game of archival hide and seek. As we will see, this strategy is hardly unusual for Boltanski and ultimately serves to underscore the point of the piece.

Opening what had once seemed to be a hidden or even forbidden box necessarily entails an element of suspense and drama (Figure 4 and cover). The exteriors are rusted and rough-looking, but their bedraggled state is only illusory: once opened the boxes reveal sleek, shiny interior surfaces that have the pleasing aesthetic effect of reflecting their contents on their vertical sides.¹⁸ While the boxes have been described as “stuffed,” in fact their contents are notably scant. Simple math would suggest this: 1,200 photographs and 800 documents divided equally among 646 boxes come to approximately three objects per box. The twenty-two boxes I saw open revealed a range from one to eight objects per box. Though Boltanski concurred that this sample was representative, there is no reason to take the artist at his word, or to place too much faith in the approximate calculations testified to by the object description, so we must allow for the possibility that this small selection (just over 3 percent of the complete piece) is misleading.¹⁹ These spartan contents appear ever so carefully placed within the boxes, usually face down and neatly folded. The choice to have spread the contents so thinly has two effects: not only does each carefully preserved



Figure 4 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B.*, 1965–1988, 1989. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, France. Detail: open box, before turning over contents. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Kate Palmer Albers.

document appear exceptionally important, like a single jewel glistening in a special jewelry box, but there are also a monumental number of boxes. Rather than the few dozen boxes that might be needed, the viewer is confronted with a towering wall of an archive.

The contents vary. One box, for example, contains an approximately 7 × 5 inch black-and-white photograph of a middle-aged woman in a bathing suit, seen from the shoulders up, and a smaller snapshot-sized color photo of a nicely dressed middle-aged couple (Figure 5). These photographs are different in kind: the former is related to Boltanski's work and could very well have appeared in one of his installations. The other appears to be a personal snapshot, a style of photograph not seen in his public oeuvre since the 1970s. In fact, according to Boltanski, it is a snapshot of some friends on their wedding day.²⁰ Another box contains a letter, dated October 29, 1973, from the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark regarding an upcoming project with the artist. A third contains a color photograph of one of Boltanski's *Compositions* photographs from 1983, alongside a typed—but unsigned and undated—manuscript of an interview with Boltanski about his work. Another reveals a Polaroid photograph of one of Boltanski's installations, together with a snapshot of a boy seated at a table with a plate of food (Figure 6). The boy, according to Boltanski, is the nephew of artist Annette Messager (b. 1943).²¹

Other documents in subsequent boxes include: a memo from the curators of the *Lessons of Darkness* show (Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob); small figurative drawings—one of a man, one of a canopy—on graph paper; photocopies of photographs that appear to be from a family album from about the 1930s; the calendar of events at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (California) from January 1977 (when Boltanski had an exhibition on view);²² a loan receipt; more blurred black-and-white photographs of the type found in his installations; a typed manuscript of



Figure 5 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B., 1965–1988*, 1989. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. Detail: open box. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Kate Palmer Albers.



Figure 6 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B.*, 1965–1988, 1989. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. Detail: open box. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Kate Palmer Albers.

what appears to be Serge Lemoine's essay about Boltanski's work, from the 1984 Pompidou retrospective catalog; notes about "Les deux idylles" at the Musée Rodin (Paris), from July 5, 1986, that appear to have been made by the artist; more Polaroids of Boltanski's large color photographs; papers documenting the transfer of artworks, and so on. It thus appears that *Les Archives de C. B.* freely mixes "art" or "professional" source photographs with "personal" photographs.

In short, as advertised, the boxes hold things—photographs and documents—that one would expect an artist to accumulate over several decades. Certainly, the contents of the boxes could be accounted for according to year, or according to category (exhibition business, personal notes, critical writing, and the like), but what emerges from the boxes, as much as their contents, is the viewer's perception of the act of looking and the artist's role in drawing his researchers in. Upon opening them, what had been concealed is revealed, and this transformative moment heightens the expectation of what one will find. Thus invested, a researcher is hard-pressed to discount any of the contents as unremarkable. How we judge the relative importance of any particular object within the boxes is entirely up to us. Yet, the oscillation between concealment and revelation is too seductive to move quickly past what, in a more conventional archive, might be passed over as unimportant. That I lingered over a museum's printed Calendar of Events from over thirty years ago, scrutinizing it for meaning, is only the result of its presentation within such a precious format.

One box, when opened, reveals a particularly beautiful interior, containing a single black-and-white photograph of a young woman standing in front of a setting sun in Venice (Figure 7). The shimmering insides of the tin box here have great aesthetic effect, reflecting this lovely photograph on all sides and thus mirroring the reflection that we can imagine appears in the water of the Venetian canal behind the woman (but this aesthetic effect must be just chance, for the loan receipt reflected in the



Figure 7 Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C. B.*, 1965–1988, 1989. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. Detail: open box. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Kate Palmer Albers.

same way). One knowledgeable of Boltanski's life and oeuvre will recognize this image as having appeared in a series for which he collaborated with Annette Messager in 1976, the *Model Images*. Indeed, Boltanski confirms, the photograph depicts Messager herself.²³ In its 1976 appearance, the photograph was titled, "Coucher de soleil à Venise," and appeared among twenty-five photographs that Boltanski had taken to illustrate "model" photographs of beautiful subjects.²⁴ Within this other framework, the photograph illustrated the conventions and seduction of photographing a beautiful woman at sunset: it is a prototype for every tourist who has sought to capture his girlfriend, wife, or lover bathed in the fleeting and shimmering beauty of a magical city. Within the second framework, the outward and knowing representation—even instruction—of photographic conventions is replaced by the viewer's curiosity about the archival significance of this *particular* photograph.

The Archival Garbage Can

Boltanski describes the impulse for *Les Archives de C. B.* as wanting to clean up, wanting to get rid of all the clutter in his studio. For years, he explained, he had kept everything, and finally it was too much. However, with items such as photographs of friends and family, love letters, and other personal mementos, it was difficult to get rid of everything. So, he says, creating *Les Archives de C. B.* "was a way to throw them away and not to put them in the garbage."²⁵ He could get rid of them and, at the same time, preserve them. Boltanski claims that there was no sorting, no plan for which photographs and documents went in which boxes.²⁶ He simply filled 646 tin boxes with whatever happened to be lying around the studio. The artist's claims to random allocation are necessary, for without them *Les Archives de C. B.* would run the risk of appearing too ordered, too deliberate, and not "raw" enough. In other words, Boltanski does

just enough to nudge the material of the archive toward aesthetic product while simultaneously alienating it *just enough* from the illusion of raw, unsorted documents.

Indeed, there is no clear connection between the individual objects in each box, suggesting that Boltanski did simply gather material that had accumulated over the years and incorporate it into *Les Archives de C. B.* Likewise, the arrangement and organization of the boxes themselves (and not just their contents), is also of crucial importance. Like the documents they contain, the boxes seem to be at once controlled and random. While neatly stacked, identical in size, and displayed in a grid, there is no imposition of order such as one would expect in a “proper” archive and no labeling system to guide a researcher to their contents or a curator to their placement. Nor could this type of more typically archival system ever be put in place: the boxes’ status now as a complete artwork prohibits anyone—purely on an ethical basis—from “arranging” the contents any differently.²⁷ As Gumpert commented, “lacking any index or order, [*Les Archives de C. B.*] is, practically speaking, unusable.” That is, it is “unusable” as a normal archive—to be sifted, sorted, tagged, rearranged, and mined by scholars intent on their own “new” orders and histories. Yet it *is* usable as a platform from which to consider the role of personal storage and individual attempts at archiving the material of our lives, photographic and otherwise.

For whom does such material have significance? Although many of the objects contained within Boltanski’s boxes are recognizable—such as loan forms, images from his artworks, manuscripts of published interviews and essays—many others are not. Primarily, it is the personal photographs—Messenger’s nephew, a vacation snapshot from the beach at Berck-Plage, friends on their wedding day—that a future historian would have a particularly difficult time decoding. Boltanski is well aware of this, as it is a point that is true for any archive. However, Boltanski acknowledges that even he himself does not really remember the friends in the wedding photo, whom he has not seen in a number of years.²⁸ If Boltanski himself does not remember the significance of the photographic subjects squirreled away in his “archive,” what exactly is a historian finding out? Which version of “Boltanski” is revealed here? With architectural restoration, one must choose a target date to which a building will be restored; in an archaeological dig, one must privilege one specific historical epoch over another. In viewing an artist’s archive, a researcher attempts to “restore” the artist’s life, but is it the Boltanski of 1989, who remembers who these people in the snapshot are? Or the Boltanski of 2005, for whom they are no longer significant? Boltanski sets this reconstructive and restorative role of the art historian into motion, while at the same time, calling attention to the absurdity and impossibility of the project.

In 1969, of his modest little album *Recherche et presentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950*, Boltanski could say: “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.”²⁹ Thus, twenty years later, in the “trace” of *Les Archives de C. B.*, this aesthetic mark of an archive that is not, technically speaking, an archive, it would seem Boltanski has succeeded. His life, it could be said, is indeed in some way “secured, carefully arranged and labeled in a safe place, secure against theft, fire and nuclear war.”³⁰ Boxing up one’s archive, calling it an artwork, and—best of all—selling it to a major museum would seem to achieve this

goal. After all, a museum's primary function is to care for its collections, and the ingenious move to transform the ordinary photographs and documents from one's life into *art* assures Boltanski's quotidian artifacts a safe and long-lasting home.³¹

Yet the mute facade of boxes also provides the negation of this view. For, in fact, with *Les Archives de C. B.*, Boltanski simultaneously ensures that his archive will be functionally inaccessible. An artist's archive is a primary source of study in most serious scholarly inquiries, but the artist ensured his photographs' and documents' protection via mummification, enclosing them and then limiting access. Unlike a typical artist's archive, which might be bequeathed to a particular library, museum, or research center for the benefit of future scholars, and transformed by archivists into a sorted, categorized, and searchable entity, *Les Archives de C. B.* proactively prevents this from happening. Any bits and traces—or significant chunks—of the past he has tucked away in this artwork will not be in any "official" archive that might one day exist, an archive that might be categorized, sorted, tagged, and filtered according to someone else's taxonomies. Boltanski has thereby effectively guaranteed that any future archive that may be put in place after his death will necessarily be an incomplete one.

The impulse in 1989 to cordon off sections of his archive in unusual ways was not new for Boltanski, nor would it be the last time he would distribute his personal effects in this way. In 1972, he had held an auction during which he sold the contents of his desk drawers to the highest bidder, thus simultaneously valorizing and dispersing the relics of his daily life.³² The impulse was ongoing: in 1993, the artist donated a number of objects from his personal collection—including drawings; samples of the many pipes he continually smokes; and objects such as a knife, a pen, and a watch he had used as props for his various photographic projects—to the Karl Valentin Museum in Munich. This museum, dedicated to one man (a German actor, comedian, and satirist) is clearly off the beaten path in terms of ease of access to future art historians.³³ While some artists may wish for their archives to be bought or acquired by a prominent art institution, through these repeated gestures, Boltanski insists on negating this desire.

In a recent interview, Boltanski commented, "I think the difficulty of seeing a work of art is part of the work of art."³⁴ This stance, which builds on the impulse to scatter his archival remnants and is clearly evident in *Les Archives de C. B.*, was demonstrated again in his 2001 installation, *La Vie Impossible*, a piece the artist considers a direct companion to *Les Archives de C. B.* Like the 1989 project, *La Vie Impossible* gathers together artifacts, ephemera, documents, and photographs that one could imagine eventually comprising the artist's archive.³⁵ It is, however, in some way the 1989 project's opposite. Rather than exhibiting closed boxes that "are said to contain" photographs and documents from the artist's archive, *La Vie Impossible* is comprised of twenty tall yet shallow wooden vitrines mounted to the wall (approx. 5 × 3 feet), filled like overstuffed bulletin boards with layer upon layer of the artist's archival material (Figure 8). As with *Les Archives de C. B.*, these consist of photographs, drawings, loan forms, letters, and the like, all jumbled together in a seemingly arbitrary way. Though they seem to offer these materials for our inspection, each vitrine is covered with a wire mesh screen, and they are installed in a gallery with extremely low light.

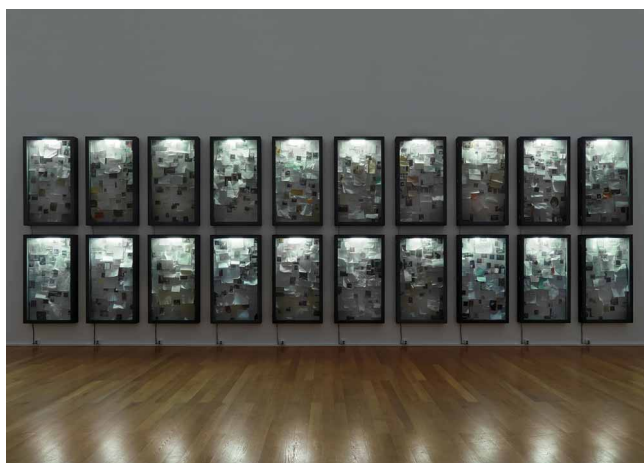


Figure 8 Christian Boltanski, *La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski*, 2001, as shown in the exhibition *La Vie Possible*, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, 2009. Twenty cases, archival documents, and neon lights, dimensions variable. Collection Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. © Christian Boltanski. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Image: Stephan Altenburger.

While each vitrine has a lamp affixed to its interior, it would be an overstatement to suggest that the dim glow the lamps emit somehow constitutes lighting for the archival material.³⁶ Rather, the lights primarily display their own functional inadequacy. While the contents of the vitrines are visible to some degree, seen through mesh and in a darkened room their details are extremely difficult to decipher. Indeed, the experience of peering into the cluttered, dark, large wooden frames of *La Vie Impossible* makes even more obvious the voyeuristic (or maybe just plain nosy) impulse of the viewer, as she wonders, who signed that letter (only part of which can be seen)?, who is standing next to Boltanski (in the photo that is obscured by the letter)?, and more.³⁷ Thus, even more explicitly than *Les Archives de C. B.*, *La Vie Impossible* offers the tantalizing promise of full archival disclosure, but retracts that promise even while making it.

It's Not an Archive

Curiously, according to the artist, *Les Archives de C. B.*, despite its name, is not an archive. When pressed, Boltanski insists on this point, stating it several different ways: "It's not an archive. It's art about archive[s];" "You know, it's a piece. It's not an archive"; "it's like, to speak about an archive, but it's not an archive. I don't care about archives. I care to speak about archives. It's not the same thing." And, yet, a moment later he acknowledged, "in fact in these boxes is my real archive."³⁸ Boltanski's back and forth here should not be dismissed as an instance of evasiveness, or, at least, not purely so. The categorical indeterminacy of *Les Archives de C. B.* is precisely what makes it interesting and Boltanski's own comments on the piece should, perhaps for once, be taken at their ambivalent face value. It's not an archive, but it contains his real archive. The artist pushes the project just far enough into the aesthetic realm that a viewer's determination of its "proper" category is perpetually deferred.

As such, the stories and conclusions that we are tempted to draw from the work's suggestive riches come to rest, finally, on art, not document.

Boltanski claims that what is important in *Les Archives de C. B.* is the "idea of the archive inside. It's not the archives that are important. It's the idea that for the spectator, for the visitor, that he *knows* that something is inside. It's not to look at them."³⁹ This suggests that the work should operate purely conceptually, which is appropriate since nearly everyone who encounters it in the gallery will *not* look at the contents inside. Nevertheless, Boltanski further claims that it doesn't even matter if his "real" archive is inside. For him, it's not important to be honest—as he puts it—about what is inside. Here we may think again of Foucault's suggestion that the archive is most powerfully read as a framing network that makes certain histories possible. Boltanski's insistence then that we understand *Les Archives de C. B.* as pointing to a conceptual framework rather than boxes of stuff may seem a contradiction but actually underscores this viewpoint.

Yet it *does* matter that his "real" archive is inside: personal photographs, professional correspondence—not junk mail or old newspapers or nothing at all. The work is most effective in its operation at the hinges: between artwork and archive, between public and private. Were it not so close to a "real" archive and were there not documents of actual historical importance inside (by scholarly standards, at any rate, if not the artist's own), it would just be a stack of boxes with an empty promise; there would be no reason for a viewer to become engaged.

Boltanski thus raises questions about the *process* of archiving itself, and of providing access to the contents of the archive, the photographs, the textual documents that historians use to tell a story. He is fundamentally aware that archives imply a future use, and speak more to this future than to any past they purport to document. Gumpert notes briefly that *Les Archives de C. B.*, secured as it is in the MNAM collection, succeeds "in preserving and documenting, for the indeterminate future," the details of the artist's existence. "Here was proof," Gumpert writes, "that he lived at such-and-such address and that he received a letter from such-and-such a person on such-and-such a day."⁴⁰ The *indeterminate future* to the archive is the key.

In his influential 1995 *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) argued that even a "typical" archive cannot offer smooth passage from past to present. His text has at its core the argument that an archive never refers to a point of origin in the past but is, by contrast, always opens to the future. This point of view engages well with Gumpert's observation that *Les Archives de C. B.* is successful in preserving and conserving the details of Boltanski's existence "for the indeterminate future." Boltanski is not concerned with helping the future scholar to piece together his life, but with highlighting both the conventional structures we rely on to make a story of history possible and the impossibility of ever being able to do so in a way that returns us to some "true" Boltanski. By using the framework of "archive," a construct that we expect to shed light on the past, Boltanski most effectively makes his point that a future reconstruction is all that is possible. Derrida's proposition that "the question of the archive is not... a question of the past," echoes the points Boltanski made with *Les Archives de C. B.* Boltanski creates just the kind of future-oriented ambiguity that fuels Derrida's theoretical position.⁴¹ It is nevertheless the simultaneous promise

of the work to offer means to reconstitution, coupled with a built-in denial of that initial claim, that accounts for the work's seduction.

In toying with the production of his own archives, Boltanski is producing a certain reading (arguably, the one I am making here) of his concerns and body of work. Further, I would add that the process of reading *Les Archives de C. B.* in turn produces as much as records the "events" of Boltanski's life: there was a time in Venice, there was someone's nephew, a show, there were friends. All of these things were photographically or otherwise documented. But what do they tell us now? To whom do they speak? It is not just the boxes' contents that Boltanski is interested in, or that he asks his researchers to be interested in. Rather, it is the very process of his "archivization" of such documents and the process of reconstitution in the "indeterminate future" in which Boltanski is interested. How can we read these personal snapshots that belong to someone else, and picture people we don't know, even if their owner is a famous artist? What can they possibly reveal? While art historians have a professional stake in biographical resuscitation, Boltanski's "not an archive" resonates more broadly toward a shared cultural impulse to record our own lives. We all have boxes of photographs, notes, letters, and mementos—if fewer actual objects, in a digital age, than we used to. As the artist puts it, sometimes the stub of a train ticket is more important than a love letter—but only the person who kept them would know why.⁴²

Boltanski's somewhat perverse desire for *Les Archives de C. B.* underscores his seemingly contradictory position of having secured the documentary remains of his past, and simultaneously taken steps to prevent them from being too readily reassembled by anyone in the "indeterminate future." His professed hope is that someone catalogs the contents of all 646 boxes without consulting with him as to the significance or origin of any of the objects.⁴³ Then, the cataloger should try to reconstruct the artist life from the photographs, letters, clippings, and the like as if Boltanski were already dead. It is an idea very close in spirit to his lopsided "collaboration" with Didier Semin for his 1988 monograph.⁴⁴ Semin agreed to write the text for which it was decided in advance, in consultation with the artist, that there would be no interview and no contact with the artist. As Boltanski summarized it, "One could speak of the rules of the game that were established from the start and that Didier followed: I didn't want to see him and he had to think of me as dead. . . . I gave him truly no information. It was remarkable: he never called me."⁴⁵ Almost a decade later, Daniel Soutif suggested that for his essay on the artist in another monographic catalog, he attempt to "reconstruct" Boltanski's career through various fragmentary articles and artifacts. Boltanski, who liked the results of his non-interview with Semin, readily agreed.⁴⁶

In the transformation of archival material to aesthetic object, from private document to public display, Boltanski activates an engagement on the part of the viewer, a curiosity that will never be sated. Boltanski has secured the documentary remains of his past, and simultaneously taken steps to prevent them from being too readily reassembled by anyone in the "indeterminate future." Very few of us have the opportunity—or the desire—to "discard" our personal archives into the care of an art museum. Yet in constructing an elaborate model for deferring investigation, Boltanski encourages it.

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- 1 According to Musée National d'Art Moderne archival records. However, Boltanski did not think that Blistène was the curator at the time. Christian Boltanski, interview with the author, March 2, 2006.
- 2 For general studies on the emergence of the archive as a critical subject for artists, see Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, eds., *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, with essays by Geoffrey Batchen, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Susan Buck-Morss, Susan Stewart, et al. (Munich: Prestel, 1998); Rebecca Comay, ed., *Lost in the Archives* (Toronto: Alphabet City Media, 2002); David Campany, ed., *Art and Photography* (London: Phaidon, 2003); Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008.)
- 3 For instance, while scholars Ernst Van Alphen and Richard Hobbs have taken an interest in the centrality of photographic archives within Boltanski's work, they have focused largely on those works deemed evocative of the Holocaust. See Richard Hobbs, "Boltanski's Visual Archives," *History of the Human Sciences* 11, no. 4 (November 1998): 121–40 and Ernst van Alphen, "Visual Archives as Preposterous History," *Art History* 30 (June 2007): 364–82.
- 4 For more on this series, which has been extensively written about, see especially Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob, *Christian Boltanski: Lessons of Darkness* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988); Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); and Danilo Eccher, *Christian Boltanski* (Milan: Charta, 1997). See also Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- 5 Christian Boltanski, *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944–1950* (Paris: Edition Givaudan, 1969). A number of Boltanski's early works address storage, archiving, and the theme of reconstitution, particularly his 1970–1971 *Essai de reconstitution (Trois tiroirs)*, the 1971 *Vitrine de référence*, and the auction he held in 1972 selling the contents of his desk drawers. I elaborate on this in my dissertation, "Archive, Atlas, Album: The Photographic Constructions of Christian Boltanski, Gerhard Richter, and Dinh Q. Lê" (Boston University, 2008).
- 6 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130.
- 7 *La Vie Impossible* was first installed at the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie in Dessau, Germany in 2001, an exhibition that jump-started my interest in the artist's work in an archival context.
- 8 Since being purchased in 1989, the monumental installation has been exhibited in São Paulo, Brazil (2002); Marseille, France (2002); and twice at the MNAM (1992, 2005–2006). In each location, the piece was part of a larger group show.
- 9 "...un résumé de toute son œuvre et de toute sa vie." From *La collection du Musée national d'art moderne: Acquisitions 1986–1996* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996).

- 10 Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 140.
- 11 Serge Lemoine reads Boltanski as a formal descendent of minimalism in his essay, “Les formes et les sources dans l’art de Christian Boltanski,” in *Christian Boltanski*, Bernard Blistène, ed. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984). Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 140, notes that Boltanski himself has made this connection. Interestingly, a draft of Lemoine’s essay is contained in *Les Archives de C. B.*
- 12 MNAM museum label, viewed June 2005. *Les Archives de C. B.* was on view at the MNAM for the 2005–2006 *Big Bang* exhibition of highlights from the museum’s collection.
- 13 According to Boltanski (interview, March 2, 2006), neither he nor anyone else actually counted the objects in the boxes when he made the piece, and the numbers given are his estimate from the time of the work’s original 1989 showing. Since then, according to the MNAM archivist, Evelyne Pomey (interview with the author, March 7, 2006), the contents of *Les Archives de C. B.* have not been cataloged by the museum, so the numbers do, in fact, remain an estimate.
- 14 Christian Boltanski, interview with the author, June 23, 2005.
- 15 Normally the boxes are stored off-site and are extremely difficult for scholars to access (Pomey, interview, March 7, 2006), a fact that only enhances the inaccessibility of the piece. I viewed the contents of these boxes with museum archivist Pomey and, it seemed from all accounts, we were opening them for the first time since they were assembled in 1989.
- 16 I thank Boltanski scholar Catherine Blais for pressing this point.
- 17 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006.
- 18 Boltanski (interview, June 23, 2005) claims over time to have bought about 7,000 boxes from a biscuit box supplier in Paris, telling the supplier that he made cakes. He manufactures the rust on the exteriors by exposing them to a variety of acidic solutions. Initially, he claims, he urinated on them (one of several of the artist’s Warholian gestures); unable to keep up with the number of boxes he needed, later he used Coca-Cola or oven cleaner. He last used biscuit boxes for his installation in the reopened Reichstag; these boxes were from a German supplier. He suggested that his supplier in Paris had gone out of business.
- 19 Boltanski, interview, June 23, 2005.
- 20 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006. I photographed the boxes’ contents and brought Boltanski printouts to identify.
- 21 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006. Annette Messenger and Boltanski have lived together since the 1970s.
- 22 The exhibition was *Christian Boltanski: Stories and Posters*. In 1990, the museum changed its name to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.
- 23 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006.
- 24 Other photographs included such idyllic subjects as a mother and two children walking in a park, a boat at dock, a girl running along a beach, and two children next to rabbit hutches. In the exhibition and its catalog, the photographs were accompanied by Messenger’s drawings.
- 25 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006.
- 26 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006.
- 27 Though, one could imagine an online version of *Les Archives de C. B.* in which the contents were endlessly sortable.
- 28 Boltanski, interview, March 2, 2006.

- 29 Boltanski, *Recherche et présentation*, n.p.
- 30 Assuming, that is, that the MNAM has state-of-the-art storage facilities, though one doubts even their off-site storage is safe from "nuclear war."
- 31 Boltanski (interview, March 2, 2006) is aware of the unusualness of his situation, comparing himself to an older friend who is trying to decide whether or not to keep photographs of his old girlfriends, saying, "I am very lucky. . . because I have made a piece, an art piece, of that. And now it's in the museum. You know, it's easier."
- 32 For details on this project, see Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 138–39. The project was titled, "Musée social: Dispersion à l'amiable du contenu des trois tiroirs du secrétaire de Christian Boltanski." Gumpert (p. 140) notes that with his work, Boltanski "was both conserving and erasing traces of his existence."
- 33 Boltanski (interview, March 2, 2006) admires Karl Valentin (1882–1948) a great deal and has said, perhaps alluding to a shared spirit between the two men, "I thought it would be funny that my archive. . . was in the museum of a clown." For more on this project, see Virginie Freyder, "Les oeuvres du fantaisiste, ou le statut de l'artiste dans les travaux de Christian Boltanski" (MA thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, October 2001). Thanks to Catherine Blais for this reference.
- 34 As cited in Hans Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Entendre les chiens* (Cologne: Walter König, 2005), 29. Boltanski was discussing his project for the 2005 Venice Biennale, in which the difficulty of accessing an island to view his project was an important element. He also related this to an archives project he did at the music conservatory in Paris that is open to the public, yet difficult to find (I can attest to this fact) and even to the often arduous journeys of religious pilgrims, for whom the challenge of getting to a place is crucial to the meaning of the "final" reward (something along the lines of, "the journey is the destination").
- 35 *La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski* was the title of a film Boltanski made in 1968 and showed at his first solo exhibition in Paris, *La Vie Impossible*, in 1968, as well as the title of an artist's book (Cologne: Walther König, 2001) in which he imagined that his friends, acquaintances, and professional colleagues had been asked to describe him after he had died (Boltanski made up all of their responses). The book was published on the occasion of the 2001 exhibition *La Vie Impossible de Christian Boltanski* at the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie in Dessau, Germany, where the installation *La Vie Impossible* was shown. The artist's reuse of the phrase throughout his career signals its ongoing resonance for him. *Les Archives de C. B.* is also the title of a 1998 film made about Boltanski by Brigitte Cornand, and the recent book-length interview between Boltanski and MNAM curator Catherine Grenier titled *La Vie Possible de Christian Boltanski* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 2007).
- 36 I have seen this piece exhibited twice, once at the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie in Dessau, Germany, in 2001, the work's premiere, and once at the MNAM in Paris in 2005. Though the installations differed in terms of space and gallery size, the extremely low light was characteristic of each. My thanks to Evelyne Pomey at the MNAM for making it possible to see the 2005 installation after the exhibition had ended. *La Vie Impossible* has been seen (and written about) more frequently than *Les Archives de C. B.*, having been installed also in 2002 at the Jules Kewenig Gallery in Cologne, Germany; in Siena, Italy, at the Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea in the same year; and at the Galerie Yvon Lambert in Paris in 2003. Like *Les Archives de C. B.*, it is owned by the MNAM, Paris (purchased in 2004).

- 37 In contrast to *Les Archives de C. B.*, which, as noted above, has not been fully cataloged by the MNAM, *La Vie Impossible* has been carefully and fully photographed, with wire mesh screens open and closed, and numerous detail shots, by the MNAM (though, like the 1989 piece, there is no itemized listing of the contents of each vitrine). Thus, a researcher can quite easily gain visual access to material that, when on view, would otherwise be extremely difficult to decipher. My thanks to Evelyne Pomey for showing many of these photographs to me.
- 38 Boltanski, interview, June 23, 2005.
- 39 Boltanski, interview, June 23, 2005.
- 40 Gumpert, *Boltanski*, 133.
- 41 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Penowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.
- 42 Boltanski, interview, June 23, 2005.
- 43 Boltanski, interview, June 23, 2005.
- 44 Didier Semin, *Boltanski* (Paris: Art Press, 1988).
- 45 “On peut parler des règles du jeu qui ont été fixées au départ et que Didier a suivies: je ne voulais pas le voir et il devait considérer que j’étais mort. . . Je ne lui ai donné vraiment aucun renseignement. Il a été remarquable: il ne m’a jamais téléphoné.” “Christian Boltanski: la revanche de la maladresse,” conversation with Alain Fleischer and Didier Semin for *Art Press* 128 (September 1988): 6. Their conversation took place after the publication was completed.
- 46 Soutif’s essay appeared in a monographic catalog, *Christian Boltanski*, Danilo Eccher, ed. (Milan: Charta, 1997), published for the exhibition, *An Attempt to Reconstruct Christian Boltanski*, at the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Bologna.