

Expropriating the Subject

Reading Boltanski with Agamben

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“All my work is more or less about the Holocaust,” French artist Christian Boltanski claims.¹ However, he never wanted to speak directly about the Holocaust. His work, he claims further, is conscious of the Holocaust, but it is not an art that has the Holocaust as a theme or tries to explain it; rather, it is articulated because the Holocaust has taken place. It is an art that comes after.²

In the following I will try to read a couple of Boltanski’s works in the light of this statement. I will not read them as an all-embracing testimony to the traumatic and to most commentators unrepresentable historical event to which we refer by the name of the Holocaust, but on the contrary focus on a certain aspect of the Holocaust: namely desubjectification – that is, the reduction of the human being to naked life, to wordless, almost inhuman *Muselmann* – and show how this desubjectification is transformed into a more general human experience in Boltanski (controversially Boltanski, who is half Jewish, has said: “The Holocaust is only an example of dying. Of common and impersonal dying.”).

In his book *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben reads the *Muselmann* as emblematic of Auschwitz and the Holocaust.³ *Muselmann*, a dated German word meaning, literally, Muslim, is the Lager term most often found in Primo Levi’s writings⁴ and designates “the irreversibly exhausted, worn out prisoner close to death.”⁵ According to Levi the *Muselmänner* “form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.”⁶ Sarah Kofman also describes “the detainees, who were close to complete powerlessness, for all human power lay beyond them; who were transformed by the SS into beings without faces, without “self,” anonymous, grotesquely “disguised,” reduced to the worst abjection.”⁷ The *Muselmann* is a result of the Nazi regime’s wilful and organised transformation of human personhood into mere thing, of its fabrication of *Figuren*, figures.⁸ The *Muselmann* had lost all will, consciousness, language and instinct of self-preservation. He or she is an indeterminate being, a border figure, in which it is no longer possible – or hardly possible – to distinguish between the non-human and the human, in which life and death continually intermingle, a living corpse. As also noted by Adorno: “The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an indi-

1 Interview with Steinar Gjessing, November 1993, in *Terskel/Threshold* nr. 11 (Oslo, januar 1994), p. 43.

2 Cf. the interview with Doris von Drateln, “Der Clown als schlechter Prediger”, in *Christian Boltanski. Inventar* (exhibition catalogue, Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1991), pp. 61-63.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

4 Cf. Brian Cliff, “On Language and Violence”, in Roberta S. Kremer (ed.), *Memory and Mastery. Primo Levi as Writer and Witness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 107.

5 *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 98.

6 *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 82.

7 Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 42.

8 The expression *Muselmann* was in common use in Auschwitz, from where it spread to other camps as well; in other camps the living dead were called “donkeys”, “cretins”, “cripples”, “swimmers”, “camels”, “tired sheikhs”, *Muselweiber* (female muslims) or “trinkets”, cf. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 329n5. Also cited by Agamben, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

vidual who died but a specimen.”⁹ How is it possible to bear witness to this desubjectification, this transformation of the human subject into an object; of the human being into a non-human?

The work-series *Chases High School* from 1986–91 more or less directly evokes the Holocaust in that it relies on an image of specifically Jewish children. In this work Boltanski has used a photograph portraying the 1931 graduating class of the Jewish Chases High School that he found in Ruth Beckermann’s book on Jews of Vienna, *Die Mazzesinsel. Juden in der Wiener Leopoldstadt 1918–1938* (Wien & München: Löcker, 1984). The smiling faces of the 23 students in this “ordinary” class photograph have been rephotographed individually and enlarged until the individual features of the portrayed subjects are effaced and blurred. As a result, their eyes are transformed into empty black sockets while the smiling mouths are turned into grimaces of death. The photographs, presented in tin frames either perched on double stacks of rusty biscuit tins or placed in different configurations with these archive- or even urn-like biscuit tins, are lighted from above by extendable desk lamps. The aggressive glare of the lamps evokes the lights used in interrogation and torture rooms. Instead of illuminating they are blinding and obscure the enlarged faces even further.

The exhibition catalogue shows the original class photograph with the following caption: “All we know about them is that they were students at the Chases High School in Vienna in 1931.”¹⁰ The caption underlines the fact that the remaining picture has no correspondence with a present reality: the faces of the students as they appear in the photograph have disappeared. And this disappearance is what is acted out in the extreme close-ups. What we see is not the realistic illusions of living subjectivities, as the traditional view of photography and of the portrait would have it, but empty, blinded faces, objectified persons.

Given the fact that a major part, perhaps all, of the represented Jewish students lost their lives in the Holocaust, *Chases High School* can be seen as an explicit *reference* to the Holocaust. But Boltanski’s work is not just about the Holocaust through reference to the victims. It also evokes the Holocaust by means of the connotative effects of the photographic signifiers. The enlarged images, that transform the faces into skeletal vestiges, remind us of the photographs of emaciated survivors of the camps which was published after the end of the war.

There is also another non-referential way in which Boltanski’s

9 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 362.

10 Quoted in Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 98.

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work evokes the Holocaust. *Chases High School* and other works like for instance *The Purim Holiday* can be considered as archives, in that they, with no overt comment and without providing a narrative frame, bring together images of Jewish victims of the Holocaust. By doing this they remind us, as Ernst van Alphen has noted,¹¹ of the lists of people who died in the camps, compiled by the Red Cross after the war; and thereby evoking the incomprehensible number of victims of the concentration camps. But the object of these representations remains the archive as institution, not the “archived” subjects themselves. What is pointed at is the archive itself; the archival mode as something desubjectifying. It is thus the desubjectification itself, which is acted out, re-presented and thematised.

As van Alphen emphasizes it is important to note that the last two ways in which Boltanski evokes the Holocaust – that is, by reminding us of photographs and lists made at the time as documentation – do not rely on reference as such. Boltanski produces what van Alphen calls a “Holocaust-effect” by means of a reenactment of principles that in a certain sense define the Holocaust:

11 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 99.

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namely a radical emptying out of subjectivity as a road leading to the mass destruction of a people.¹² The two elements in Boltanski's work that produce this "holocaust-effect" are his consistent use of photographic portraits and of the archival mode – what I would call his consistent desubjectification of the represented subjects.

In the work-series *The Dead Swiss* from 1990–91 death is universalised and made common in that it doesn't, as in *Chases High School*, allude or refer specifically to the Holocaust, but to human death in general. The "subjects" portrayed in this series are some three thousand dead Swiss citizens as depicted in the obituary announcements published in a Swiss regional newspaper. As in Boltanski's other photographically based works these already grainy photographic portraits have been reshot and enlarged, but this time not blurred, stressing the normality of the represented – as also Boltanski has commented on the work: "Previously I made works concerned with dead Jews. But 'Jew' and 'dead' go too well together, the combination is too illuminating. By contrast, there is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is really no reason at all why they should die; in a certain sense they are more frightening, because they are like us."¹³ Even though the portrayed subjects can be recognised and identified, the sheer number of similar portraits transforms the sense of individuality typically evoked by the portrait genre into one of impersonality and anonymity.¹⁴ Thus, once again, the work can be seen as a reenactment of a defining principle of the Holocaust: namely the transformation of subjects into objects, or desubjectification.

12 Cf. *ibid.*

13 Quoted by Günter Metken, "Memento mori and Shadow-Play", in *Terskel/Threshold* nr. 11 (Oslo, januar 1994), p. 21.

14 In the following I draw heavily upon Ernst van Alphen's description and comments, *op.cit.*, p. 106f.

This desubjectifying transformation comes about as we view the work. When regarding the first image we can still activate the traditional belief in the capacity of portraiture: the presence of a unique individual being is somewhat clear. As we go on from image to image, all similar and, ultimately, all the same, the opposite happens, and we sense only the lack of presence, or rather, a profound absence, of unique human beings. The deceased are reduced to one identity, to neutral repetitions of the same, cut off from their life stories, and the portrayed are just anonymous, random specimens of the human race. What we see is only a collection of exchangeable objects.

In this desubjectification the work undercuts the standard view of the portrait (as something that captures the reality and truth of a person's subjectivity and thus makes the portrayed subject present). By representing these people as dead, it foregrounds the idea that the photographs have no referent; and by representing these human beings without identifying features, it negates the "presence" in the portrait of an individual. All the portraits are exchangeable (the Swiss keep dying, as Boltanski says): the portrayed subjects have become anonymous. They all evoke absence: not only absence of a referent outside the image, but absence of presence within the image as well. The portraits are dead because they provide neither presence nor reference. All that the pictures offer in their plain materiality as signifiers are human faces. In this way both portraiture and photography prove unable to supply the presence of someone's subjectivity; on the contrary, they turn the subjects into objects – discussing the process of being photographed Roland Barthes writes of a sense of inauthenticity and that it was as if he were "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre."¹⁵

Boltanski thus uses the impossibility of re-presenting a living subject in a photographic image or language, its transformation of the subject into object, as a strategy for representing the desubjectification that is also a defining principle of the Holocaust. In other words, the general, common experience of desubjectification in photographic representation is employed to speak about and to bear witness to the concrete biopolitical desubjectification in the concentration camps. In emptying out that which was meant to signify the individual human being Boltanski's work displays the photograph's deceptive ability to function as an "authentic" trace or souvenir of personal experience.¹⁶ Displaying

15 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 14.

16 This could be compared to what the work of Samuel Beckett does in relation to language, see my article "Enunciation, Subjectivity, and Neutrality – Artistic Experience in Samuel Beckett" in: *Nordisk estetisk tidskrift/The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 29–30, (2004).

nothing but human faces the signifiers are empty, and the signified has disappeared. The referent in Boltanski's photographs is not a singular *she* or *he*, but a collective *they* which in an *unheimlich* way confronts the viewer with the interchangeability of the human subject, with his or her own interchangeability. A comparison could be made to the way that the personal pronoun, the word "I", is an "empty" signifier; a shifter that does not refer to an exterior reality but, being always available, is "filled" by whoever utters it, stressing the exchangeability and thereby foreclosure of the subject that tries to represent itself. How can *I* be this "I" that refers to anybody who utters it? The "I" that one imagines to signify oneself is the signifier with which everyone "signifies" him or herself. It is a marker of the subject only as long as that subject is within an enunciation – analogous with the photograph's being coterminal with its referent: as soon as the click of the shutter has taken place, what was photographed no longer exists. Giorgio Agamben has described how the appropriation of language that establishes the passage from language to discourse implies this desubjectification and expropriation of the speaking subject: "the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter 'I,' which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse. [...] Appropriating the formal instruments of enunciation, he is introduced into a language from which, by definition, nothing will allow him to pass into discourse. And yet, in saying 'I,' 'you,' 'this,' 'now ...,' he is expropriated of all referential reality, letting himself be defined solely through the pure and empty relation to the event of discourse."¹⁷ Like the exchangeable, desubjectified faces of Boltanski's photographic portraits the shifter "I" does not refer or correspond to a living being in an exterior reality; it does not effect a shifting from the nonlinguistic to the linguistic, but from language to discourse, from the language system to its use; the deictic shifter does not simply demonstrate an unnamed object, but first of all the very instance of discourse, its taking place, and thereby in a certain sense excludes the reality of the speaker – language speaks always already, we could say.

The way that representation excludes and negates what it represents or designates has been described by Maurice Blanchot in his essay "Literature and the Right to Death": "Of course, my language does not kill anyone. And yet: when I say 'this woman', real death is announced and already present in my language; my

¹⁷ *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 116.

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language means that this person, who is there right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and plunged suddenly into a nothingness of existence and presence. My language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is, at every moment, a resolute allusion to such an event. My language does not kill anyone. But, if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and united to it by an essential bond, I would not be able to accomplish that ideal negation, that deferred assassination that is my language.¹⁸ Language, representation, the image appears on the background of the absence of the thing. When something is represented, in words or images, it loses its singularity in order to be communicated. In taking place language necessarily decomposes the thing it announces into a being *about which one speaks* and a quality and a determination *that one says of it*. Language supposes and conceals what it brings to appear, in the very act of bringing it to appear.¹⁹ It is this decomposition and negation characteristic of representation itself that Boltanski employs as a means to bear witness to an experience of desubjectification, which concerns us all.

Towards a conclusion I will briefly turn to the desubjectification of the artist subject, Christian Boltanski. What happens to the subject who tries to appropriate the expropriating and desubjectifying photographic language?

¹⁸ "Literature and the Right to Death", in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 42–43.

¹⁹ See Agamben's "The Thing Itself", in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

Boltanski has given a long series of interviews, of which it can be claimed that they have become an integral part of his artistic practice, one of his artistic mediums, in that he not only gives meta-comments on his work but also questions and “fictionalises” or mythologises his own subjectivity, for instance by making his real historical life, his biography part of his artistic material, and by telling lies about his childhood and then admit these as lies claiming that he doesn’t remember anything from his “real” childhood (furthermore he has written his own biography in the third person and has had it printed alongside the standard biography in all his major monographs since 1984). Asked by Steinar Gjessing what it means to him to be an artist today, and what an interview about his work means to him, Boltanski answers: “Each time you do an interview you lose a part of yourself. You are always repeating the same words, but an interview is never the truth – it is only a discourse. It’s a kind of portrait, but not the real portrait. The problem for an artist like me is that the more I work the less I am alive. In fact I have been dead for a very long time, perhaps since the moment I chose to be an artist. I am no more than my art and that is all. [...] When you are an artist, you gradually become your art. You are not real anymore. [...] I am just working out my tomb. I like the idea that when you are an artist you are in fact a mirror and everybody looking at the mirror can recognize himself. The man who produces the art is behind the mirror – he is no longer alive, he is nobody, he is only the portrait of the other, the portrait of each person.”²⁰

The work *Ten Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski, 1946–1964* from 1972, that has also been made as an artist’s book, shows according to the handwritten captions portraits of Christian Boltanski at different ages, but this temporal frame is pure fiction: all the photographs have actually been taken by his wife, the artist Annette Messager, the same day in a parisian park. And on a closer look it is only one of them that depicts Boltanski (the accompanying text claims that the portrait depicts Boltanski at the age of 20, but actually he was 28 when it was taken), the other 9 are randomly picked boys who happened to be in the park the same day, and on whom he bestows the pronoun “I”. The person “Christian Boltanski” could be whatever child: “This little book was designed to show that Christian Boltanski had only a collective reality ... [that of] a child in a given society.”²¹ His singular being is dissolved and Boltanski himself becomes an *example*, *exemplary*, a desubjectified and expropriated subject. His own

²⁰ *Terskel/Threshold* nr 11 (Oslo, januar 1994), p. 41.

²¹ Boltanski in an interview with Delphine Renard, “Entretien avec Christian Boltanski”, in *Boltanski* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), p. 79.

“identity”, his construed, represented persona – Christian Boltanski – is actually a death mask.

Confronted with the impersonal desubjectification in Boltanski’s works we become aware of ourselves as subjects; aware that we too are subjects to desubjectification, that representation, in images or words, necessarily bereaves us of our singular individual being, making us common in trying to communicate us. At the same time it is only through the experience of this non-coincidence with the representation that we sense ourselves as being different from what is represented and thereby as having an individual singular being. In Boltanski we become aware of that which has disappeared, that which is absent in the representation, which can’t be brought to language, to communication: namely the living human being.

I have tried to read Boltanski’s work as an answer to the initially posed question of how it is possible to bear witness to desubjectification, to the transformation of the human subject into a non-human object. What the work bears witness to is desubjectification *itself*, not to the Holocaust directly, but to one of its defining principles.

Through the enactment of the universally human desubjectification in photographic and linguistic representation, through this bearing witness to a general desubjectification, Boltanski’s work indirectly bears witness *for* the *Muselmann*, the fully desubjectified, whom according to Primo Levi is the complete witness of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. I think this is a way to understand how all his work is more or less about the Holocaust, how it is an art that comes after.

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