

Christian Boltanski: Personnes Grand Palais – Paris

13 January- 21 February 2010



Christian Boltanski, Personnes. Installation for Monumenta 2010 at the Grand Palais, Paris. Photograph: Didier Plowy

'When Paris sneezes, all Europe catches a cold'. These words were voiced by the Austrian foreign minister Prince Metternich with reference to the French Revolution and the fear it brought into the rest of the European states. This time, Metternich's quote gets a direct meaning. In just the middle of the very cold winter, after Paris "sneezed" an astonishing project at the Grand Palais, the whole Europe can feel now the repercussions.

Always being the artistical centre of Europe, this city saw works from the most elegant to the oddest ones. It has been a place for imagination, recreation, revolt, inspiration all at the same time; but it was never yet transformed into a place of fear. It seems that its major exhibition hall had been turned into a concentration-camp warehouse, and Christian Boltanski does want us to feel blocked in his massive installation nightmare. "People will be relieved when they get out," this is what he expects in a booklet published by the French Ministry of Culture.

For so many years Christian Boltanski has been

producing vibrant reminders of life's predictable passing, engaging us even deeper with every second work that screams about death and survival. His set is usually the human trace in the memento mori, and this time he still kept the format of his common subject. The first two "Monumenta" projects took place in late spring, presenting works by Anselm Kiefer and Richard Serra. Boltanski is the third artist who was invited to use the enormous hall beneath the glass-and-steel palace for a unique show. He chose winter because of the diffused light mingle through the dome, the frost, coldness and the shorter days, insisting on a turned off central heating. "I want the visitor to feel inside the work, not just to look at it," he says. The title of the work is "Personnes," a French word with two meanings: many people and nobody; to be and not to be.

This is an enormous nave of 13,500 square meters, (more than four times the size of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall) filled with old clothes arranged in precise rectangles surrounded by wires with low-hanging neon lamps. The booming, thriving noise like a thunderstorm or like the drums of war is, in fact, the echo of hundreds of heartbeats. Boltanski has been recording individual heartbeats since 2005, and stores the recordings on the Japanese island Teshima. What does the heart bits mean? Are they trying to recall catastrophes, endlessly making a hard effort to live? Probably this is their connotation, creating an extreme, loaded commemoration break in sound and vision, about death, chance and destiny.

There is no doubt the artist wanted to delay the viewer's connection with the space: the first thing to see at the entrance is a wall of numbered rusted metal boxes that blocks the view. Do they contain records or relics? Is it about whole families reduced to a note on a card, whole



nations reduced to a tiny artifact? But the most spectacular is expecting the viewer behind the wall; a ten meters high mountain of clothes and a massive mechanical scratch that constantly gets down to grab some of them, lift them up to the Palais's ceiling and let them fall; an implacable mechanized process, bending between the human and the inhuman.

Boltanski created a whole experience for everyone who entered the Palais. People walk, they look, they search for facts between the musty raincoats and weaved cardigans. Who wore these clothes? Young and old, they were not ready to die; poor dead souls who left nothing behind but clothes. Trying to observe the details of each and every one, to find distinct persons under the dusty textiles is like honoring the death, because these grouped clothes may represent a cemetery. Nobody makes an exception and nobody is unique in this sense. We are all *Personnes* now, and become *Personnes* after we disappear. Impartial between heaven and hell, witnessing the freezing place, one is probably eager to be gone. That is the outstanding accomplishment of the work. All its requisites are simple and evident, but the real mystic is when they all combine, showing man's inhumanity towards man, that continues beyond

Auschwitz, Srebrenica or Rwanda. Boltanski locks you there, makes you interact with the work instead of standing before it like a picture. And after all this appalling experience, he asks you to record your own heartbeat in a tremendously futile and utopian project *Archives du cœur*, a collection of recorded human heartbeats. This is a sound that frightens some, brings delight to others, or indicates one's liberation to life. The preference, as in life, is all ours, shared with the question of destiny and death.

Personnes transformed the entire Nave of the Grand Palais into an extremely touching installation considered as a colossal animated representation. *Personnes* is a transitory, temporary work; the components of the installation will all be recycled at the end of the exhibition, questioning one more time the significance of human destiny and stressing the right of every human being to a place in a common memory.

Emptiness, coldness, fears, repulsive feelings will embrace you while interacting with the project. But as a whole, it works for an irresistible metaphor, a fascination with Holocaust and a call for intensely profound thoughts.

Boltanski makes you feel the individuality without identity; he finds a new way of filling the space with sound and creates an impression of industrial machinery.

"Personnes" reminds of an extermination camp where the prisoners were forced to band before being grouped into the gas chamber, it makes us recall the horrible and shocking moments of the history. Christian Boltanski created a real time-machine that gives us the possibility to go back to the years of war, and at the same time he keeps us safe physically but may be not psychically, as the experience one passes there, will definitely leave a print in his mind.

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