*Introduction*

Christian Boltanski was born in 1944 in Paris. He’s French from Jewish descent, and a self-taught artist, using mostly photography and mixed medias/materials installations through his work. He has been producing artworks since 1986. Boltanski presented over 150 exhibitions throughout the world. The Jewish Holocaust represents a strong influence on his work; indeed, the way people have been paying tribute to the victims of this disaster strongly influenced the aesthetic of his art, which mostly deals with archives. The subject of memory is central and essential in understanding Boltanski’s work. In a way, his art states that no one has to be forgotten.

This led him to the development of what he calls small memory, and strongly separates himself from the historical aim of archive and memory duty. For instance, in “Reserve of Dead Swiss”, he puts up a real memorial to people of Switzerland that died in ordinary circumstances. His work tends to make the viewer bind to the people concerned by his artwork, through non-historical data and non-historical stories.

**‘Reserve of Dead Swiss’**

Christian Boltanski’s artwork ‘Reserve of Dead Swiss’ is often overlooked by most art critics, gallery owners and curators, it is not considered one of the most prominent pieces produced during the artists’ archive fever. Throughout his four-decade-long career

Boltanksi has explored relations between objects and memory. The artist’s archive fever started in 1967, several years before the production of ‘Reserve of Dead Swiss’, he began making artworks using traces that people leave behind such as photographs and lost personal belongings.[[1]](#footnote-1) His works are seen as memorials to specific individuals and anonymous people. In 1991 during and interview in *Tate Magazine*, Boltanksi said, "What drives me as an artist is that I think everyone is unique, yet everyone disappears so quickly."[[2]](#footnote-2) Boltankis ‘Reserve of Dead Swiss’ follows the concept of archive, storage, remembrance, making people remember life even after death.

‘Reserve of the Dead Swiss’ was produced by the French sculptor in 1991, it is a fairly large installation, 362 x 218.4 x 97.5 centimetres consisting in in vertical column compositions made out of black tin boxes and photographs, precisely snapshots. The tin box columns of different heights are arranged in an uneven line, some located in the foreground and some in the background, creating an irregular effect, portraying movement within his piece. The installation is tinged with religiosity and death. The arrangement of the columns create a narrow corridor effect making the structure chapel-like.[[3]](#footnote-3) The snapshots, affixed on the front of the tin boxes, are images of Swiss citizens collected from newspaper obituaries. By using these photographs, the piece ‘Reserve of the Dead Swiss’, in some way memorializes the Swiss people who have died in the most ordinary ways. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Boltanksi’s archive concept is closely linked to the use of theatrics, a fundamental aspect in his piece. "I have never said anything honest about my own childhood," he once remarked.[[5]](#footnote-5) He describes himself as a "false preacher who spoke of death with a suitcase full of little books, photographs and fake relics." Boltanksi not only manufactures his own history but the one of others. Boltanksi manipulates the viewer’s emotions unleashing the power of memory related to object. ‘Reserve of Dead Swiss’ includes an unidentified snapshot of someone still alive, a stark contrast to the concept of memorial of the dead. The tin boxes created with the purpose to appear old and the out-of-focus photographs modified to confuse and stun the audience. Struggling to decipher these blurry faces, a viewer can hardly avoid constructing a provisional narrative, a sense of who the anonymous faces represent and what their fate has been.[[6]](#footnote-6) This form of manipulation is the artist’s way of expressing how archive is personal and can be manufactured and distorted by anyone. An archive follows the principal of selection, there is always someone who selects what is to be remembered. By introducing fake artifacts in his work Boltanksi is expressing how people and archives dictate our memories. However, the use of common household objects such as the biscuit tin boxes is significant because they trigger associations between viewers' own personal memories and imaginary memories of the anonymous lives suggested by these objects[[7]](#footnote-7). Therefore, even if the memory is triggered by a false recollection of the past, true personal memories may remerge from it.

Bibliography

1. <http://www.magical-secrets.com/artists/boltanski> Article by Kim L. Bennett
2. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/arts/art-view-dead-reckoning-from-obituary-to-art.html> ART VIEW; Dead Reckoning: From Obituary to Art, By Michael Kimmelman, Published: January 13, 1991
3. <http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv_e/ZBH3nMP8O7gGve9tIQAc/> Memory, too, fails at such excess, By Andrew Maerkle

1. The examples cited are from the following source: ‘Magical-Secrets: A Printmaking Community. The Art of Etching & the Truth of Life’ by Kim L. Bennett (online reference) available from <http://www.magical-secrets.com/artists/boltanski> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The examples cited are from the following source: ‘New York Times : ART VIEW; Dead Reckoning: From Obituary to Art’ By Michael Kimmelman (online research) available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/arts/art-view-dead-reckoning-from-obituary-to-art.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The examples cites are from the following source: ‘Art-IT-Asia. Memory, too, fails at such excess.’ (online resource) available from [http://www.artit.asia/u/admin\_ed\_itv\_e/ZBH3nMP8O7gGve9tIQAc/](http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv_e/ZBH3nMP8O7gGve9tIQAc/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The examples cited are from the following source: ‘Art-IT-Asia. Memory, too, fails at such excess.’ (online resource) available from [http://www.artit.asia/u/admin\_ed\_itv\_e/ZBH3nMP8O7gGve9tIQAc/](http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv_e/ZBH3nMP8O7gGve9tIQAc/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)