

1 MUSEUMS AS POLITICAL CENTERS



In 1989, Christian Boltanski's *Lessons of Darkness* exhibition toured North American museums to great critical acclaim. Works such as his *Archives* – composed of rusted tin biscuit boxes (suggestive of “memory containers” stored in attics) and faded family photographs lit by individual electric lamps – seemed to evoke the fragility and pathos of private efforts to preserve memories and received special critical attention and praise (Fig. 1). Here were forms and subjects so familiar, curators claimed, that they seemed to reach out to each individual viewer, triggering his or her own private memories and making a space for the uniqueness of personal experience within the institution of the museum.¹ Furthermore, Boltanski's evocative installations seemed to address another challenge. The catalog essay that accompanied the exhibition, written by Lynn Gumpert, stressed that Boltanski had recently revealed that his father was Jewish and had gone into hiding during the Second World War. The faded family photographs, therefore, were taken by critics and curators to represent not merely deeply personal memories, but also the numerous individuals who had passed from life into memory in the violence of the Holocaust.² In other words, Boltanski seemed to have provided new ways for museum audiences to access and emotionally respond to a previously suppressed history and to have permitted the museum to represent what had previously been suspected to be unrepresentable within its confines. His work was deemed to give such powerful new access to history that its signature images and forms were adopted in other works that dealt with this unspeakable horror, such as the *Tower of Life* installation of family photographs at the Washington, D.C. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Even the German government saw Boltanski as a figure who could generate an appropriate artistic response to its past, commissioning him for an installation in 1999 in the renovated Reichstag building in Berlin (Fig. 2).

Some years later, the curators of the 2002 Documenta 11 exhibition in Germany similarly felt the need to address the experiences of ordinary people following a decade that had seen its share of political and economic turmoil: the violence in the Persian Gulf and Rwanda, and in the more immediate European neighborhood with the wars in the former Yugoslavia; the attacks of September 11, 2001; and the disruptive

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84109-2 - The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968

Rebecca J. DeRoo

Excerpt

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Figure 1. Christian Boltanski, *Archives*, 1988. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo courtesy of Bob Calle.

effects of economic globalization. The Documenta catalog explicitly formulated the goal of the exhibition as bringing into the museum stories of oppressed and marginalized groups that museums had not always had the courage to confront. In this context, Annette Messager's *Articulés-désarticulés* (*Articulated-Disarticulated*) (2002), soft sculptures composed of fabric and parts severed from stuffed animals, created powerful evocations of dismembered bodies and expressed the personal agony of suffering and loss (Figs. 3–4). Critics and curators praised Messager's use of ordinary materials to reference the larger human condition of oppression and provide ways for viewers to understand the effects of history on the private lives of those who were usually overlooked.³ Messager's work was thus commended by curators and critics for making cultural institutions face up to the everyday experiences of violence and suffering that characterized the lives of many but that museums had not done a good job of representing.

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)**Figure 2.**

Christian Boltanski, *Archiv der Deutschen Abgeordneten*, 1999.
 © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.
 Photo © Deutscher Bundestag.

The aims of these two exhibitions typify a broader cultural move in the last two decades to open up art and its institutions not only to histories that had been marginalized and previously suppressed but also to new audiences, who it was thought were likely to be engaged by these new images and stories. Since the 1980s, international museums have felt challenged to be engaged politically, as well as accessible to and broadly representative of a diverse population – a far cry from the isolated realms of art and culture that they had once seen themselves as. The prominence of Boltanski and Messager in these international contexts was perhaps not entirely unpredictable; this was not the first time their work arrived at an extraordinarily felicitous moment, when museums were seeking to respond to demands for greater inclusion and accessibility. Nor was it the first time that curators saw their work as making museums accessible by reaching out to viewers in new ways.

Boltanski and Messager had first exhibited to widespread critical acclaim in France in the aftermath of the May and June 1968 protests, the largest strikes and demonstrations in modern French history, when workers, artists, and sympathetic members of the public joined with students who had launched wide-ranging protests against the Vietnam War; the Gaullist state; capitalism and the society of consumption; and French social, political, and cultural institutions, particularly the educational system. All told, approximately nine million people went on strike in solidarity with the student protesters, forming a new kind of alliance between

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Figure 3. Annette Messager, *Articulés-désarticulés*, 2002. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo © Annette Messager and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris/New York.

students and workers and paralyzing the country as banks, public transportation, the postal service, newspapers, gas stations, and department stores were shut down, and nearly precipitating the fall of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic.⁴ Unions were reluctant to strike, but workers did anyway, giving the protests the feel of a spontaneous popular movement sweeping the nation. Workers in both public and private sectors struck for better working conditions and self-determination in the workplace. Students demanded more open access to universities and schools along

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)**Figure 4.**

Annette Messager,
Articulés-désarticulés (detail), 2002.
 © 2005 Artists Rights Society
 (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.
 Photo © Annette Messager and
 Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris/New
 York.

with the modernization of the curriculum.⁵ The university, students argued, had become the place where canonized knowledge was dispensed to a privileged few; rather than serving to improve life for all citizens, the university functioned as a means of maintaining the social hierarchy.

These tumultuous political events of May and June 1968 generated a reassessment of the unified collective history and national identity that museums were seen to embody. Since 1793, when the French revolutionary government opened the royal palace at the Louvre to the citizens of France, redefining its treasures as belonging to the citizenry rather than to the king, French art and museums have been considered privileged national property.⁶ Over the years, French museums came to be seen not merely as sites for the preservation and exhibition of art, but also as crucial symbols – what the historian Pierre Nora has called *lieux de mémoire*, repositories and embodiments of the nation's collective memory and identity.⁷ The museum was to represent France to itself: its history, its culture, and its democratic aspirations. Because it has had such an important purpose, the museum has since been a battleground when the idea of the nation has been challenged. Although Nora locates the 1980s as the moment when the consensus that museums could adequately represent the nation's collective history breaks down, it is reasonable to suggest that these recent contestations began much earlier than that.⁸ In the revolutionary fervor of 1968, this concept of museums as

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representations of a unified national culture had come to appear elitist, outdated, and disconnected from the everyday, personal, and political experiences of the diverse groups that made up the French people. Thus, when artists, art students, and critics, along with striking workers and university students, took to the barricades in May of 1968 with the aim of transforming French society, art institutions of the time became a crucial site in the larger battle. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, activists attacked museums, calling for more representative, accessible, up-to-date, and politically engaged art and cultural venues.⁹

Yet once the recognized models of art and museums were exploded, artists and curators were left with questions of how new forms for collective representation were to be found and new audiences reached. The debates sparked in 1968 continued to inform French cultural policy for the next decade, culminating in the construction of a new museum of modern art in the Pompidou Center in 1977 (see Fig. 72). Even though the French government took these concerns seriously and made ambitious attempts to respond to them in its construction of the new museum, the issues raised in the 1968 activism and its aftermath were so controversial and wide-ranging that they have not been well documented and therefore not fully addressed by curators and art historians, even in France. In essence, this is a decade lost to historians, and one of the first and extremely influential state efforts to respond in cultural policy to the new activism of the late twentieth century has been dramatically underexamined.¹⁰

In the 1980s, the artwork and issues developed in France in 1968 and the decade following came to international prominence in broader European and North American contexts. By that time, however, the issues raised by the 1968 protesters had become intertwined with the demands of the feminist and multicultural movements. Although in the 1980s and 1990s, as opposed to the decade after 1968, the demands on museums were different – voiced in terms of multiculturalism or a more highly elaborated discourse of feminism, in contrast to the emphasis in 1968 on social class and the newly emergent call for women's liberation in the early to mid-1970s – in both contexts, museums were recognized and challenged as symbols of collective memory and identity and their organizers felt forced to respond to calls for greater inclusion of social diversity. Despite these differences, curators and critics in both contexts seized similar solutions, deeming artists' displays of private images and everyday objects a powerful strategy to address the pressures facing the museum. Boltanski and Messager were not the only artists to work with these media, but they rapidly became two of the most celebrated, because their

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personal images were seen to remake museums in innovative ways.¹¹ In the aftermath of 1968, when these artists began their careers, they created exhibitions that looked nothing like the work that had been displayed in French museums before. Instead of elite masterworks or abstract painting, audiences were faced with personal and everyday objects – family pictures, school notebooks, and childhood memorabilia – presented in museum formats, such as in ethnographic display cases. Curators and critics in post-1968 France saw the artists' exhibitions of private memorabilia and everyday objects as triggering viewers' individual memories and thus providing new ways to reach out to and include broader audiences.¹² In this way, they saw the artists' exhibitions of private images as creating an inclusive, responsive museum. These early critical responses established a pattern in the interpretation of Boltanski and Messager and of the display of private material in the museum that has remained prominent ever since.

It is a central contention of this book that museums' use and interpretation of the artwork of the private and everyday, of which Boltanski and Messager have become renowned practitioners, have from the start been compromised by a misunderstanding of both the artists' projects and the activism of 1968 from which it arose. Whereas curators and critics promoted the artists' display of personal and everyday objects as making art and museums more accessible and universally representative, it is argued here that the artists' work in fact raises questions about the ability of art and museums to be accessible to all or to represent the collective. For example, Boltanski's work from the 1970s, like his *Archives* in the 1980s and 1990s, incorporated personal memorabilia, such as objects from childhood and family photographs. In his 1970 *Vitrine de référence*, for example, Boltanski displayed childhood souvenirs, such as photographs, sugar cubes, balls of mud, and tool-like objects that resembled things he had made as a child (see Fig. 37). He presented his objects as an archive with factual labels that stated the type of object and the date of its creation, but he gave no indication of its personal significance. His vitrine thus illustrated both the ways museums traditionally presented history and the impossibility of preserving personal memories within these frameworks. Similarly, in his 1988 *Archives*, Boltanski's invocations of personal memory are anything but straightforward (see Fig. 1). The tin storage boxes contain debris or are empty; the family photographs are faded and barely recognizable, thus inhibiting viewers' attempts to retrieve the memories that they ostensibly preserve. His work appears to promise the preservation and communication of memories, yet simultaneously frustrates such objectives.

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Like Boltanski's displays, Messenger's exhibitions cast doubt on the accessibility and universality that critics have attributed to her work, challenging museums' objectives rather than resolving them.¹³ In the early 1970s, for example, Messenger exhibited diary-like collection albums (see Figs. 49–50). Although curators saw these albums as easily accessible representations of daily life, there is a challenging undercurrent to both the form and the content of the pieces. The albums were forms customarily considered feminine, and their content referenced the traditionally feminine preoccupations of housework and child rearing; their inclusion, therefore, underscored how such "women's work" had been traditionally excluded from the museum. Similarly, her 2002 installation at the Documenta 11 did not simply, as some critics and curators contended, depict universal human suffering; it could also be read as suggesting female figures and employing traditionally feminine materials to reference the oppression endured by women in particular.¹⁴ In this way, her display of "feminine" materials and subjects challenged the idea that any representation in the museum could be universal in meaning.

If these tensions in Boltanski's and Messenger's artwork are overlooked, the work seems to provide the solutions museums are seeking. However, when these conflicts are recognized, it becomes clear not only that the work does not solve museums' problems, but also that it offers a potentially destabilizing critique of their inadequate responses. Boltanski's and Messenger's private images, in other words, do not provide straightforward access to previously excluded histories. Instead their private and everyday images emphasize the way the private histories, memories, and everyday experiences of marginalized groups are resistant to incorporation within museums' representations of national identity and public history.

This book argues, therefore, that museums were only partially faithful to activists' demands for more inclusive and representative museums. In fact, museums frequently misunderstood and misrepresented the work of some of the very artists they exhibited to address these concerns. By returning to the original manifestation of both these problems and their proposed solutions in 1968 France and the decade following, we may draw lessons for the situations contemporary museums now confront. My approach is twofold: first, to return to the moment when the demands for inclusive and representative museums originated in the protests of 1968 France, and to examine how, over the decade that followed, artists and museums attempted to resolve these demands with displays of the private and everyday. Second, I aim to bring to light the

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ways in which the work of Boltanski and Messager, which came to be celebrated as emblematic of the new museum, actually challenged museums' aims. These challenges were sometimes perceived when the work first was shown, but they have since been lost from view because of the great possibilities the themes of the private and everyday seemed to offer the museum as it tried to render itself more democratic. Thus by examining key facets of the cultural politics of 1968 as they were exemplified in Boltanski's and Messager's work – the notion of the death of the author, which opposed what activists saw as the fetishization of artistic biography and genius, and the analysis of art institutions – my goal is not simply to reconsider the dominant interpretation of Boltanski and Messager. It is, rather, to bring back into view the politics of the artwork and the movement to which it belonged, Conceptual Art, especially the ways in which it advanced the activist agendas voiced in 1968, in particular, the critique of the museum.¹⁵

The protesters of 1968 who raged against the notion of the isolated genius and the ideal of the artist's biography as the key to the meaning of his or her work would be skeptical of the turn that Boltanski's recent critical reception has taken. The acclaimed 1988 and 1989 *Lessons of Darkness* exhibition and catalog essay by Gumpert, described previously, cemented Boltanski's prominence on an international level and simultaneously set in motion the biography-centered interpretation that his work revolved around an effort to address the legacy of the Holocaust. Drawing from her 1987 interview with Boltanski in which he revealed that his father was Jewish and had gone into hiding during the Second World War, Gumpert contended that the aging black-and-white family photographs in Boltanski's archives, and indeed much of his oeuvre, constituted an immediate way to access the memory of lives lost during the Holocaust. Gumpert's provocative essay is one of the most powerful examples of the tendency to treat Boltanski's work as autobiographical expression.

However, the inconsistencies that arose when I examined Boltanski's life as represented in published interviews, art criticism, and artwork, as well as in interviews that I conducted with the artist over the course of eight years, should make us rethink any straightforward interpretation of the biographic information he presents. The details of Boltanski's ethnic identity and his family connection to the tragedy of the Holocaust certainly permit a reading of his more recent work that ties it to the horrors of the Shoah. Boltanski himself at one point during the mid-1980s and early 1990s seemed to encourage such a reading and in fact created the works *Lycée Chases* (1988) and *La Maison manquante* (1991) (*Chases High School* and *The Missing House*), which specifically reference the period

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of the Holocaust.¹⁶ But significantly, since that time he has downplayed and even disavowed not only his Jewish identity but also interpretations that would ground his work in the biographical details he had recently put forth, in the same way that he disavowed earlier representations of his identity – the suicidal artist desperate for recognition and the nostalgic and sentimental collector of objects from times past.¹⁷ This pattern of advancing an image of his life and then rejecting or turning away from it is part of a larger pattern in Boltanski's career. Although the identities he presents may inform and deepen our readings of his work, we should hesitate to accept any particular biographical presentation as the single key to Boltanski's work.

I first noticed these contradictions when tracing Boltanski's critical reception. After almost every new interpretation or interview was published, Boltanski advanced a different line about his life and work that conflicted with or contradicted previous ones.¹⁸ Boltanski was clearly playing a game with his biography, one that extended to our conversations in Paris. When he telephoned me, simply announcing "*c'est moi*," I never knew which Boltanski I'd get; during our exchanges, he frequently shifted back and forth to inhabit the varied and contradictory selves that he had created in earlier interviews and autobiographical work. Boltanski continues this play with his identity in the present, alternately taking on the personae of a recluse, guru, or preacher. Given his pattern of advancing and withdrawing biographical interpretations, it would be dangerous to understand Boltanski's entire career through the lens of an identity that he offers at any single moment since it may be simply one in a series of identity games.

I read this dynamic as an instance *par excellence* of Boltanski's employment of the notion of the "death of the author," an idea which came to the fore in the 1968 protests and was used to address what protesters saw as the dangerous tendency of notions of artistic genius and biography to remove the artist from his or her social, political, or institutional circumstances. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and critics writing for the *Cahiers du cinéma* also developed this idea in theoretical writings of the period.¹⁹ Boltanski's approach, I believe, comes closest to Foucault's, who in "What Is an Author?" analyzed how authors were constructed by literary institutions such as literary criticism and copyright law, whose corollaries in the visual arts can be found in art criticism and museum and gallery exhibitions. Boltanski's work elaborated these ideas of the "death" of the artist in the years following 1968 when institutions were in flux. This early work set up a pattern he has maintained throughout his career in which he adopts and parodies clichés of the artist in order