

Monumental Boltanski

by Jeanne CALMONT

Two years before the opening of Monumenta at The Grand Palais (Jan. 13 – Feb. 21 2010), Christian Boltanski (born in 1944) already imagined that it would be amusing to empty out a place like The Grand Palais and “to present a small quavering tape recorder, but he admitted that it wouldn’t be very honest considering people would have paid to enter. I sincerely feel an obligation towards the public, one that doesn’t deceive.”

How much do the visitors who are also collectors have to jeopardize during auctions in order to acquire a piece of work from the artist and not be disappointed?

The risk is not great. For if the artist is known for making the biography the principal theme of his work, his work is the invention of a distorted biography evoking a past that he did not completely live. Concerning the convening of familiar objects and images, Boltanski is the master storyteller of a personal myth evoking a fictitious life to which everyone can relate. The artist feels that “**The good artists are no longer living; their only life consists of telling what seems to each to be his own history.**” Judging by the latest figures at auction, he seems to be on to something; and it should be noted that his theory operates beyond the borders as well: only 26% of the global works are sold in France compared to 31% in the United Kingdom and 37% in the United States.

Begun in 1985, MONUMENTA is representative of the dissolution of autobiographical memories in the collective memory. Here, the artist makes anonymous photographs and other memorabilia into altars lit by electric lights. Estimated between 30 000 - 40 000 Euros and animated by lightning, one of these *Monuments* has already sold for €58 000 on December 8, 2009 at Sotheby's (Paris). The series *Monuments Odessa* is a variation of this work where religiosity is commemorative. Almost 2 meters tall, two of these works were bought for €40'000 in December 2008 at Lempertz (Cologne) and €32'274 in October 2008 at Christie's (London).

Created during the same period (between 1980 and 1990), certain installations are consecrated to and by a myriad of wax candles. Between filament and shadows, these works are generally sold for about €35'000, which was the case for *Bougies*, acquired for €36'000 in Lempertz (Cologne) in December 2008 and *Shadows from the Lesson of Darkness* which brought in €57'480 in October 2007 at Sotheby's (London).

Estimated between 50'000 and 70'000 Euros, the *Reliquaires* (dating from the late 1980s) are less frequent in auction houses. Made of a stack of metal boxes, these totems of light evoke Boltanski's early work on the theme of lost childhood.

Author of the book *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance* (1969), Boltanski (early 1970s) explores the subject in the third dimension through a series of tin cans, boxes biscuits, drawers ... which contain the secrets of emotional memory and nostalgia. These works filled with small items are estimated at between 6'000 and 12'000 Euros. Topped with a

photographic portrait in black and white, one of the drawers sold for €21'638 Euros in October 16, 2009 at Sotheby's (London), doubling the estimate.

If since 1967 Boltanski distances himself from painting (without abandoning it completely), he has practiced photography on a recurring basis from 1968. Integrated into his complex works (*Monuments, Relics, Drawers ...*), or considered as autonomous work, his photography allows him to exploit the ambivalent reality that it seems to embody. From the self-portrait to the photography of his own installations, he is experiencing a true success in the auction houses, with sales starting from €1'000 to €20'000. Estimated between 6'000 - 8'000 Euros, his series of comical photography *Saynètes comiques* (1974) deserves more attention. Interpreting all the roles found in small family scenes, the artist (as he says himself in the third person) "goes beyond himself, [...] surpasses himself [...] stands back and makes fun of himself; for he no longer speaks of his childhood, he plays it up." Another example of how Boltanski is constantly able to renew the tone and surpass expectations in order to touch and surprise the viewer with the autobiography. It is without doubt that the Personnages of the eponymous exhibition at the Grand Palais will not be left indifferent.

Note : Hammer prices indicated

Note 2: Boltanski is represented in Paris by the Yvon Lambert Gallery, in London by the Lisson Gallery, in New York by Marian Goodman and in Belgium by André Simoens Gallery.

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