

The art of telling history: Christian Boltanski

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Could art tell our past in order that it could be reinterpreted?

At the end of the sixties, Europe recovers a relevant position in the panorama of the contemporary art exercising a new look towards the past. It was necessary to create a new language to check the recent history. This language must be different from the political pamphlet and from the simple testimony. Art can recover the memory of the forgotten, in spite of dead tradition, as Walter Benjamin had imagined the role of the historian.

Between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, many artists have explored the topic of the individual and the collective memory. In France this trend was defined as "art of the memory ", and it was present in the section "Personal Museum" in *Documenta V*. Christian Boltanski was represented in this section.

Art has always investigated the big topics of the existence but its role of moral judge "in real time" is more recent. Photography and video have provided new languages for artists to explore history. Those languages have a presumption of putative reality. Hence, the artists must value correctly the tension between fiction and truth in his creations.

In the past, the territorial memory, the *genius loci*, has influenced the forms of art. In the 20th century, the vanguards have chosen a strategy of supranational experimentation but in 80's artists recovered the value of the memory. The problem today is to define the limits between a simple presentation of the history and a work of art.

Chantal Maillard affirms that our sensibility has turned into a simple thermostatic system. Thus, our sensibility adapts our emotions to reality. Art then, has to make us see not only what we have not see, but also to reinterpret what we see.

Nowadays Christian Boltanski continues investigating the topic of the memory, using old photographs and clothes to tell stories about our past. Nevertheless, the tension between document and fiction has been solved in the creation of the French artist. Boltanski seems to have chosen the metaphor instead of truth.

When in 1929 Walter Benjamin was writing on the surrealism, presenting it as one of the last instantaneous of the European intelligence¹, the end of the world the philosopher had portrayed was already approaching. Finally, the exile of many Europeans artists and intellectuals to the United States had changed the mother land of the contemporary art, though it will not erase the recent drama lived by the old Europe. The art could not be the same after the abolition of all freedom and, especially, after the holocaust.

At the end of the sixties, the European art obtains a species of parity of opportunity with regard to the art of the USA. The events of the Parisian May symbolized this new displacement of the intellectual horizon, in which generic Utopias were mixed by more definite political positions.

From 1969-70, one part of the European art it seems to return to tradition, evoking the past and the memory, using a few emotively charged images, in apparent reaction against the abstract painting and the minimal art².

This interest for the past and the memory, for time and his flow, is evident in Christian Boltanski.

Christian Boltanski has lived not only the contradictions of the France of the post-war period but also the intellectual renaissance of a new internationally recognized intelligence, capable of drawing a new cultural panorama³.

Christian Boltanski, in his *Monuments*⁴, a series of interventions that he begins in 1984, seems to wonder if a given photography can safeguard the memory of a past time. Initially, the artist uses a photography of his class when he was seven years old. The portraits of the children were illuminated by a few bulbs.

Afterwards, the 1931 photography of the class of the last course of a private Jewish high school, *The Lycée Chases*, is the central topic of an exhibition in the Kunstverein of Dusseldorf in 1987. The artist uses the faces of the pupils portrayed in the photography, enlarging them until they become unrecognizable and spectral. The topic of the death, of the time transforming the entities, is so central in Boltanski's work that his monuments look like altars to the memory, real *memento mori*. Photographies, as well as the objects and the clothes very often used in the intervention of the artist, always refer to an absence.

1 BENJAMIN, Walter, *El surrealismo. La última instantánea de la inteligencia europea*, Taurus, Madrid, 1980

2 LASCAULT, Gilbert, *Boltanski, Souvenance*, L'Échoppe, Paris, 1998, p. 16

3 ABOUCAYA, Martine, "Interview" in Boltanski, Christian, *Voyage d'Hiver*, Paris, 1997, p. 45

4 It is a series of installations that the artist begins in the eighties and in which it uses old tin of cookies, photographs, bulbs, etc. to create a few ephemeral monuments to memory.

Some artists can reveal the significances of a few “hollow” objects, forgotten objects for a society which is capable of multiplying and successively emptying the sense of virtually anything.

The western culture depends not only on different and even contradictory memories, but on big and small amnesias⁵. The 20th century has prolonged the trend to the repression of memory, a trend that according to Walter Benjamin, derives from the crisis of the concepts of memory and experience, a crisis that is typical of the modernity⁶.

The history, as the memory, seems to read the world with a magnifying glass, favouring the detail when it cannot interpret or describe the force of the significant content of the set. Nevertheless, the force of the fragment, of the work of art, is sometimes so relevant that it manages to propitiate a general interpretation of an epoch or even of a culture.

Therefore, the found object has to be an object that differs from the others, because “it” has been “chosen” by an artist. Its texture, colour, form, and resemblance with another object, indicates the singularity of the found and designated object. In our society of consumption, which also seems to anticipate beforehand a near catastrophe, Boltanski gathers in the street, around his study in Malakoff, all the objects that can be useful for the creation of his works.

In this respect, art has to be ethical; it has to assume the commitment to reveal our own history:

"In any real work of art there is a place in which who are there receives a freshness as that of the breeze of a future dawn. Of here it turns out that the art, look often like refractory to any relation with the progress, can be useful to the authentic determination of this one. The progress is not in his element in the continuity of the course of time, but in his interferences: There where for the first time, with the sobriety of the dawn, it feels something really new. "⁷

From this point of view, Benjamin's conception of history turns out to be very useful to imagine a different, finally Utopian, but fascinating way of writing history. The historian, according to Walter Benjamin, has to be conscious of the need to wake up and re-live the past. History, thought as “salvation”, has to substrate the past to the conformity that can interpret it incorrectly⁸. What the artist, as the collector, can reveal to the historian is the intrinsic contradiction in the objects: the contrast between function and aesthetic values, the value of an intimate historical document, the possibility that a fragment re-intensifies a memory. This type of history does not necessary have a line organisation:

5 PASSERINI, Luisa, “Memorie tra silenzio e oblio”, in *Memoria e utopia*, Bollati Borlinghieri, Torino, 2003

6 ROSSI-DORIA, Anna, *Memoria e storia: il caso della deportazione*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 1998

7 BENJAMIN, Walter, N 9 a, 7, en *Libro de los pasajes*, Edición Akal, Madrid, 2005, p. 476 original title *Das Passagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1982 (traslation is mine)

8 Id., Ibid, N 9, 4.

“Whereas the idea of continuity to his passage squashes and levels everything, the idea of discontinuity is the base of the authentic tradition.”⁹

The most common criteria that define the value of an object are its rarity, its preciousness, and its artistic or aesthetic value. These values are very often born from a historical narration that reconstructs time according to a linear sense. In this line, *before* and *later* define the value of the objects. A utensil of simple forms of the archaic Greece takes a particular value for its antiquity and for its value of testimony of a lost culture, whereas an object found in the beach that “looks like” a utensil of the archaic Greece, does not have any interest according to the canons that stresses linear time as principal measure. Nevertheless, by considering other criteria, as the fortuitous character of an encounter or others similar ones, the found object in the beach probably acquires more value than the archaeological finding.

The study of a fragment seemingly without interest approaches Walter Benjamin's idea of an interpretation of history that witnesses the memory of the oppressed, an interpretation of history that does not celebrate the big victories¹⁰. When Christian Boltanski discovers in an old album the photographs of an unknown artist called Geo Harly¹¹, the findings return to speak about a fragmentary and discontinuous time, about a minor history that has the beauty of the whisper phrases¹².

Let us suppose that the transformation of a common object in a work of art has introduced the famous dilemma of the difference between art and reality. Philosophers, historians of art and critics have started dealing with this phenomenon as if it was a problem, according to the cases, of fundamentally cognitive, linguistic, or also institutional nature. According to Jean Marie Schaeffer¹³ nevertheless, the question is much more complex since the aesthetic conduct is irreducible to other cognitive conducts: in case of the aesthetic conduct, the cognitive attention depends on the index of internal (in) satisfaction, that is to say, if the aesthetic object provokes pleasure or displeasure. Any type of aesthetic conduct relates, following Goodman¹⁴, to the topic of knowledge and, following Kant, to the topic of pleasure. According to Schaeffer nevertheless, and in contraposition to Goodman, it is necessary to underline the non adventitious character of the relation between the aesthetic conduct and the pleasure / displeasure. Likewise, and in opposition to Kant, it is necessary

9 Cit. in COURTINE, Jean Francois, “Temporalità e storicità. Schelling-Rosenzweig-Benjamin”, in *Filosofia del Tempo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 1998, p. 177, Benjamin, Walter, *GS.*, I, 3, 1236 (translation is mine)

10 BENJAMIN, Walter, *Sobre el concepto de Historia*, in *Obras*, Libro I, vol. 2, Abada, Madrid, 2008, p. 309

11 BOLTANSKI, Christian, *Geo Harly: Danseur parodiste*, Adac, Dijon, 1988

12 Cit. in COURTINE, Jean Francois, “Temporalità e storicità. Schelling-Rosenzweig-Benjamin”, in *Filosofia del Tempo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 1998, p. 177, Benjamin, Walter, *GS.*, I, 3, 1241

13 SCHAEFFER, Jean-Marie, *Les célibataires de l'art, Pour une esthétique sans mythes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996

14 GOODMAN, Nelson, *Languages de l'art*, Jacqueline Chambon, 1990

to insist on the cognitive character of the aesthetic relation. The typology of the found object can be understood only analyzing the formal characteristics and the cognitive relations that, intermingled, provoke pleasure (or displeasure). To my understanding, the cognitive relations that the found object stimulates belong to the world of the individual memory and private history.

Walter Benjamin mentions Theodor Adorno's letter of 1935, in which Adorno refers to the Benjamin's own philosophy¹⁵. According to Adorno's interpretation, things are objects of desire or fear, of pleasure or displeasure, when they lose their usefulness; and it is at that time when the relation between the subject and the objects becomes more intense. Its value, always subjective, depends on many factors. The objects can be considered to be beautiful, curious, rare, or to support a special relation with our experience, our past. From my point of view, the latter value of the object, its value of remembrance, is particularly relevant and can be interpreted only imagining, thinking about the time and the history in a fragmentary way.

As Courtine remembers, in *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin affirms that it is necessary to interpret the present as another face of the eternity, as the hidden part in history, and to finally reveal the fingerprint of this secret face¹⁶. Eternity, thanks to the present of the historical instant, gets registered in time. Jean-François Courtine affirms, analyzing Benjamin's thesis¹⁷, that the historical structures can draw, in filigree, an invisible eternity. This means to capture the "present", or better, the "a- present" (*Jetztzeit*) underlying historical conscience. This dialectical conception of history can be represented using the image of the "awakening", as Marcel Proust indicates:

"[...] every exhibition on the history has to begin with an awakening; finally it would not have to speak about another thing"¹⁸

Finally, the operation of salvation of history and memory on the part of the artist can assimilate Marcel Proust's conception of time. Time, according to the writer, is defined as a power that constantly transforms the entities, a metamorphosis that prevents from reducing the entities to an abstract, logical identity. In the experience of time, man experiences the transformation of spaces, institutions, men, in an independent way from his desire and activity¹⁹.

15 "[...] while in things dies his value of use, the mentally ill ones are hollowed and transport with it, as codes, significances. Of them one empowers the subjectivity in the measure in which it deposits in things intentions of desire and fear." en BENJAMIN, Walter, Carta de Wiesengrund, 5 de agosto 1935, in *Fragmentos sobre teoría del conocimiento y teoría del progreso*, N 5, 2, in *La dialéctica en suspenso, Fragmentos sobre la historia*, translation Pablo Oyarzún Robles, Universidad Arcis, Ediciones Lom, Santiago de Chile, p. 130 (translation is mine)

16 COURTINE, Jean François (1998), "Temporalità e storicità. Shelling-Rosenzweig-Benjamin", in *Filosofia del Tempo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, p. 174

17 Id., Ibid., p. 174

18 BENJAMIN, Walter, *Libro de los pasajes*, Akal, 2005, p. 488, N 18, 4.

19 PROUST, Marcel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Gallimard, Paris, 1954, vol. III, p. 980

The experience of time overwhelms any person who finds a person that has aged, a construction that is ruined, or a flower that fades. Time demonstrates the metamorphosis, the non originality of the entities, and forces us to ask ourselves whether it is possible to reach the image of an original world in the constant transformation of reality. According to Ernesto Grassi²⁰, Proust tries to indicate the essentially metamorphic and metaphorical character of everything appearing to us: it is a question of the metaphysics of reality that imposes the thesis of the originality and the pre-eminence of the poetical word and, for extension, of the work of art in general. In the end, Grassi wonders whether we have managed to safeguard that which time destroys.

In the *Transcendental Aesthetics*, Kant transfers the essence of space and of time from the area of nature to that of intuition or of knowledge of the subject²¹. Space and time appear before everything in the intuition as *a priori* forms of arrangement of phenomena. Time depends, in addition, on the internal sense, since “[...] time cannot be felt as anything exterior, neither space cannot be felt as anything in us”²². The only and real structural difference between space and time is that “[...] different times are not simultaneous, but successive (in the same way that different spaces are not successive, but simultaneous)”²³.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to speak about temporary events residing in memory, according to Kant's definition, as exclusive events, since the events in memory seem to coexist simultaneously or, somehow, they seem not to respect the successive order.

In consequence, McTaggart's²⁴ interpretation of the “unreality” of time turns out to be illuminating the fact that time belongs exclusively to the existing thing: “[...] if anything is in time, it must exist.”²⁵ The philosopher asks himself what things exist in Don Quijote's adventures and reply that none, since the story is imaginary. Nevertheless, stages of the mind of Cervantes exist when he was inventing the narrative the same way stages of my mind exist when I think about Cervantes composition.

I think that the fascination of certain artists for the childhood and for the past is due to this confusion between reality and imagination, between memory and representation. Art explores the

20 GRASSI, Ernesto, *La metafora inaudita*, Aesthetica edizioni, Palermo, 1990

21 CHIEREGIN, Franco, “Spazio e tempo nell'Estetica trascendentale di Kant”, in RUGGIU, Luigi, *Filosofia del Tempo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan

22 cit. in Id, Ibid., p. 135, KANT, Immanuel, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 23/B38 (68) (translation is mine)

23 cit. in Id, Ibid., p. 136, KrV, A 31/B47 (75) (translation is mine)

24 MCTAGGART, J. M., *The Unreality of Time*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1927

25 Id., Ibid., p. 29

distance that exists between the present and all the events that form a segment of more or less distant past. Nevertheless, the past represented by works of art is so powerful because it does not need to be “real”.

The objects of art represent our memory as if they were tales. Picasso's *Guernica* shows the tragedy of the war in a different way a given photography shows, because its story assembles fragments that do not have been necessary real. Art is not concerned with a trustworthy reconstruction of an event or of a distant time, with, let us say, an archaeological reconstruction of the past. Art would not have to look for allegedly “scientific” aims but symbolical²⁶. In this respect, the concept of time is fundamental to understand many of the creations of contemporary art. The crisis of the imagination, the loss of a direct reference to the exterior reality, the pre-eminence of technical and scientific methodology as opposed to humanistic studies for the analysis of reality, the disability of the world of art to support his symbolic load, and the inability to establish a set of values, are probably the reasons that might explain a certain recovery of the topics of memory and time in Art.

Christian Boltanski recovers objects without seemingly symbolic value, indifferent objects, and displace them to the area of art. This metaphorical capacity approaches the demiurge power that Proust attributes to Elstir in *La recherche*²⁷. This invented character near to Whistler's personality, is capable of representing the world, the reality that surrounds us, in order for it to regain our attention. So, the famous yellow spot of Vermeer's *View of Delft* unleashes Elstir's dramatic reflections on the capacity of art to reveal what has gone unnoticed. Art, so understood, evokes and enhances reality to be reborn from the deepest darkness²⁸.

The fundamental difference between an operation of archaeological recovery and an operation of an artistic recovery resides in the metaphorical language, in the poetical capacity that is thereby revealed, thanks to the style of the artist. It is possible to restore a parallelism between the writing and the pictorial language, taking again Grassi's words and his Proust's quotation:

"The concept of writing requires then a style that has nothing to do with a literary perfection, but which is" [...] the revelation, impossible with direct and conscious means, of the quality difference that exists in the way the world appears to us: difference that, if it were not art, it would remain the eternal secret of each one."²⁹

Therefore, thanks to the style, the artist can reveal his vision of the world and allow that the secret

26 ZECCHI, Stefano, “¿Existe una belleza moderna?”, in *Espazos de creación contemporánea*, Auditorio de Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, 2005, p. 394

27 PROUST, Marcel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Gallimard, Paris, 1954

28 GRASSI, Ernesto, *La metáfora inaudita*, Aesthetica edizioni, Palermo, 1990, p. 86

29 GRASSI, Ernesto, Op. cit., p. 86 (translation is mine)

of this revelation could be shared.

Arthur C. Danto, the critic and philosopher who proclaimed the end of the art³⁰, the end of the evolution of art according to the story of history, devaluating Christian Boltanski's work for using a few tins of cookies that, according to him, could thrill only the Frenchmen who had known these particular sweets in his childhood but, on the contrary, they turn out to be enigmatic for all the others³¹.

Danto's critique seems to be born from the supposition that "universal" works of art exist and that such a narrow relation with a certain tradition, the Proust's interpretation of art, was annihilating the transcendence of the work of the artist. The "tradition" was seen as the original sin of the European artists. Curiously, Danto himself re-admits Boltanski among the big artists of the 20th century for being the only one, according to him, to be capable of portraying the horror of the Holocaust³².

As it will be shown later, Christian Boltanski has referred always in an indirect way to the drama of the Jewish extermination. The definition of "artist of the holocaust" given by many of the American critics, will turn out to be an inconvenience for him all along his life³³.

When in 1989³⁴ Boltanski uses, in one of his works, a T-shirt with the logo of the Batman film, he wishes to deny a direct reference of his work to a concrete drama that has taken place in the past. In his investigation the accumulation of old, left clothes, refers to a disappearance with no date, nor name. In his 1988 installation *Canada*, the artist alludes to the euphemism used by the Nazi to designate the stores where the Jews had to leave his personal effects³⁵. Nevertheless, his work does not want to be a monument to the Holocaust.

The temporary, historical references in Boltanski are "interrupted" and the artist does not wish to apply a linear time to his stories. The drama of the disappearance is so present today as it is in a remote past. So his *memento mori* stays out of time, in a time that always comes back.

Christian Boltanski works with the fragments which can wake up our memory. According to Serge

30 DANTO, Arthur C., *La transfiguración del lugar común*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2002, Or. Tit. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981

31 DANTO, Arthur C., *Más allá de la caja Brillo*, Akal, Madrid, 2003, p. 77

32 DANTO, Arthur C., "Christian Boltanski", in *The Nation*, February 15, 1989

33 GUMBERT, Lynn, "The Life and Death of Christian Boltanski", in *Christian Boltanski: Lessons of Darkness*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Chicago, 1988, p. 97

34 GUMBERT, Lynn, *Christian Boltanski*, Flammarion, Paris, 1992, p. 118

35 Id. Ibid, p. 118

Lemoine³⁶, by regarding the aims and methodology of this artist his investigation belongs to the domain of the Human Sciences. The oldest brother of the artist, the sociologist Luc Boltanski, collaborator of Pierre Bourdieu, had to have had a certain influence on the artist, particularly in the seventies. The showcases created by Boltanski that contain spheres of clay, knives, boxes, fragments of different origins, etc., quite carefully tied and labelled, remember the universe of the Museums of Ethnography and of popular traditions. Evidently, Boltanski is not the only one that uses these references: this world has inspired Daniel Spoerri in the ideation of his *Musée Sentimental*, which has had different versions from the year 1975. At the same time, Claes Oldenburg was presenting his *Mickey Mouse Museum*, and Marcel Broodthaers his *Musées des Aigles* in the same "Documents V" of Kassel (1972). Therefore, the topic of the "Museum" and the topics of collection and memory, as we have already seen, were at the center of the artistic reflection of this period. Curiously, remember Lemoine, the same Szeemann, the director of "Documents V", dedicated an exhibition to his grandfather, a craftsman- barber inventor of the "permanent", in Switzerland. In the apartment of the grandfather, the grandson was showing his personal effects, his intimate writings, his furniture, his professional utensils, etc.

Nevertheless, Boltanski will work much more with anonymous, seemingly insignificant objects. In 1995, in the Central Station of New York, Boltanski exhibits in a few racks, all the objects lost in the station in the last year. Travellers, said the artist, were themselves recognized in the lost objects (keys, umbrella, etc.) even though these objects already did not concern to anybody, they were just the symbols of an absence.

In other projects of the seventies, Boltanski was presenting the objects as belongings of concrete individuals, underlining that these things had belonged to a woman of Bois-Colombe, or to a young man of Oxford. The artist was raising the value of the objects from a simple document of the tastes of an epoch to "marks" of a concrete person. These objects could not be replaced by others being equal without a lost. The furniture of the apartment of the woman of Bois-Colombe seems to reveal nothing about her personality because they witnessed the tastes of a certain society in a certain epoch. Nevertheless, the same furniture had also witnessed the experiences of this woman. In some sense, the operation of Boltanski's "exhibition" reactivates the concept of "aura"³⁷ of Walter Benjamin, but without the idea of *hic et nunc* that the philosopher was associating with it.

The value of the object of the work of art depends, in this case, neither in its uniqueness nor in its

36 LEMOINE, Serge, "Les formes et les sources dans l'art de Christian Boltanski", in *Boltanski*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1984, p. 23

37 BENJAMIN, Walter, "La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica", in *Obras*, Book 1, vol. 2, Abada editores, Madrid, 2008

belonging to a specific place. Its value does not depend on having been created and thought for a place and time, but from his belonging to a concrete person, even though this person is a stranger to us. Boltanski's objects have been classified and arranged behind a few showcases or exposed on top of a base in a museum, thus already lacking a context and being transformed into documents of a life.

From the beginning, Christian Boltanski works to create Boltanski's own myth, where the objects, such as, photographs, contribute to its definition. The life of the artist, affirms Boltanski, has to be an exemplary life, as the life of the saints. If in the medieval times the cities wanted to obtain saints' relics, today the museums want to have a Mondrian³⁸. Lynn Gumbert has written a sharp text on Boltanski's work *Archives of C. B. 1985-1988*. According to Gumbert, this work is a real monument to its own author, which is in the collection of the National Museum of Modern Art of Paris, and which summarizes the operation of deification that Boltanski began time ago³⁹.

In a hundred of tins of cookies, all the objects that belonged to the artist up to date and were found accumulated in his study and in his house are gathered. His letters and his recollections remain finally gathered for the posterity though all these documents have a casual order thus preventing any possible historical reconstruction.

If Christian Boltanski has always investigated on the concept of time, the implication of the spectator on this question is possible for a certain type of stimulation for the memory, let us say, a site-specific stimulation. Jose Miguel G. Cortés writes:

"In this way, his works [...] acquire its historical meaning when they are formed as a mental act of time redefinition and they propose a direct experience of memory reconstruction, which for Boltanski can only be an individual memory."⁴⁰

The stories Boltanski tells us are common stories, but every person has to live it in a different way. We all have, or have had, a fetish object; we all have our "sponge-cake", nevertheless, we all live through the experience of "recalling" in a different way. The exhibition *Compra-venta*⁴¹ is paradigmatic of this type of investigation. In this case, Boltanski obtains a great number of objects that different persons in Valencia and its surroundings were ready to sell. He exposes the objects in the space of the Almudín, in order that they could be observed and acquired by any person. Every object has a small label that offers more information on it and allows the organization and

38 It is significant that Boltanski says a Mondrian and not Mondrian's picture, because the work of art personifies the whole mythology of the artist, as well as the relic represents the physical presence of the saint, LEMOINE, Op., cit., p. 23

39 GUMPERT, Op. cit., pp. 140-143

40 CORTÉS G., José Miguel, "La memoria del olvido", In Christian Boltanski, *Compra-venta*, Exposition in Sala Municipal l'Almodí, Valencia, 1998, p. 31

41 Id., Ibid., p. 31

classification of this great quantity of things. The room of the Almudín is transformed this way in a department store where a diffuse light of low intensity illuminates a series of unlike things. In between the objects of the exhibition *Compra-venta* we also find several dozens of tape recorders and loudspeakers that report different personal stories related to the own objects. Finally, the site-specific character of this installation resides in the fact that the Almudín of Valencia, a building of rectangular plant constructed from the 14th century, was used as store and place for the sale of the wheat, whereas later, until the moment of his reform in recent years, it hosted the Archaeological Museum of the city⁴². So Boltanski reinterprets the history of this place and presents it both as a store and as museum; store of anonymous objects for sale and museum of unique objects for his relation with an unique history, for his value of individual memory⁴³.

In the exhibition *Compra-Venta* a particularly fascinating object was included: a box of automata:

ultramarine where the box have been. Actually it is a retailer of chewing gum and simultaneously it was predicting the future. It is a box of American manufacture, Kola-Pepsin Gum.... These names seemed to me to be so exotic when I was a child. And the cartels and the predictions of the future are in Spanish. If you put a coin, a bolivar, the mechanism of the automaton still is driven.

“My mother

the bewitching automaton sometimes I think about the whole chain of chances that have happened in order that I am here. In all the randoms that happen when suddenly appears a person who changes your life, your feelings, your destination, or maybe that appears in order that precisely your destination is fulfilled.”⁴⁴

When his un

The box works as a species of catalyst of times and different occurrences, putting in relation a few individual stories with History, with the phenomenon of the emigration in America of the last century and the Spanish Civil war. This use of the found object remembers me, once more, the Walter Benjamin's interpretation of history and, especially, the image of the automaton that the philosopher uses to explain his theory⁴⁵. The philosopher refers to the history of the doll of von Kempelen, a simulated automaton that was hiding a dwarf and was defying the players of chess in the second half of the XVIII century⁴⁶. This was the century that develops the technical modernity. Nevertheless, in this case technology is to the service of the illusion because the automaton is a

42 CORTÉS, Op. cit., p. 33

43 “This is the mirror that has been in the buffet of the house of my grandmother. I remember some photography of these infantile ones that we all have done sitting in the buffet doing a game with the reflection in the mirror, I believe that all the Spanish children have an equal photo and all the Spanish grandmothers have had a buffet like this one.[...]”, in Id., Ibid., s. p.

44 BOLTANSKI, *Compra-venta*, s. p.

45 BENJAMIN, Walter, *La dialéctica en suspenso, Fragmentos sobre la historia*, ed. Pablo Oyarzún Robles, Arcis-Lom, Santiago de Chile, 2004

46 OYARZÚN R., Pablo, “Cuatro señas sobre experiencia, historia y facticidad. A manera de introducción”, in Id., Ibid., p. 20-34

dwarf chess-player hidden in between mirrors. The doll of von Kempelen was successful in an border epoch between the *tekhne* and the *mekhane*: technology did not have a practical application yet but it was used for the astonishment.

Benjamin raises an analogy and moves the image of the device of von Kempelen into Philosophy. The doll is the “historical materialism” and in its interior it hides the dwarf who represents the theology. The interpretation of History is in the border between historical materialism and theology. The end of History is, then, happiness. Happiness is the end both of the individual history and of the “universal” history. Nevertheless, it is not possible to understand history as a mere chain of events that follow a linear progress because it is necessary to interpret history as *discontinuity*.

In this respect, the final affirmation of the story of the box of the automaton in Christian Boltanski's exhibition brings about the inability to understand the chain of the events. It seems an interpretation of history closer to the image of Walter Benjamin's automaton. It is a question of a fragmentary history that, far from being able to be interpreted according to aprioristic laws, it seems to depend rather on the destiny or on an inscrutable justification. In spite of it, the found object of Christian Boltanski remembers us that the past never disappears, though it remains forgotten in a train station or in a rusty box.

Conclusion

The artist has to find the most suitable means to tell a story. The relation between the used means and the story defines the style of an artist. Christian Boltanski have been purifying their language to reach a necessary relation between form and story. The found object has been a fundamental element in his art. The unreal time⁴⁷ in which the story of works of art develops is the time of our memory. The children found in a photo by Boltanski will not remain forgotten in a distant time, in a fragment of the history forever lost and incomprehensible, but they will live in the infinite and fragmentary time of art.

Nowadays the work of art can recover part of the symbolic value of the monuments to safeguard a memory and an identity to share. Art can overcome the sterile limits between individual memory and collective memory using objects and documents as witnesses of our history. There is no collective memory that can escape to the easy rhetoric of the power or to the demagoguery. There are nevertheless remembrances to share and to contrast among everyone.

The work of art has to support this latter memory, the most fragile and the most precious, to avoid

47 MCTAGGART, John Ellis, *The Unreality of Time*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1927

destruction of every vestige of truth from our contemporary world, a world harassed by hurry and amnesia. The truth of our history is the one provided by remembrance articulated in the fragile documents that, thanks to the sensibility of the artists, remain recorded in our retina. The symbols of this recent past manage to re-live when the language of art is sufficiently powerful.

Nevertheless, the contemporary art of the “memory” seems to be divided between “art of file” and “art of testimony” but it rarely reaches the necessary power to differ from the mere document. The work of art cannot be confused, evidently, with the journalism or with the militancy.

Artists must escape from the trap of the document or from the mere presentation of the object through the use of poetry. The metaphor, the aptitude to move an image from one area to another, to the world of the poetry, allows that his stories should live in a time that comes out of an historical concrete moment. In this way the artist obtains what the Faust of Goethe would like to obtain: to stop the instant. The instant of an individual history is transformed in the unreal and eternal time of art.

Christian Boltanski insists that artists cannot change anything; they can only put questions and wake feelings up. Boltanski's affirmation that the “small history”, the individual history, is very fragile, remember me the suspicion that Benjamin projects on History and its tradition⁴⁸. Walter Benjamin writes:

“The chronicler who details the events without discerning between big and small, bears in mind the truth of which nothing of what happened at some time is lost for the history.”⁴⁹

For Benjamin, time has to be the result of an experience of the present that interlaces the past and the future. Therefore, any present action does not have value if it is not capable of keeping the recollection of the past alive and to penetrate it and project it into the future in order for it to continue being something alive in us. The philosopher defends an ethical - political responsibility that is opposed to a history interpreted as constant and linear progress.

History actually represents a fight that always has to restart. No aim has been reached forever; no experience belongs to our memory as a dead thing, without implication in our present and without possibility of influencing our future.

48 “From whom are phenomena to be saved? Not only, and not so much, from the discredit and contempt in which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe that very often address the phenomena to the exposure that makes a certain type of tradition, “honouring them as heritage”. – They are remembered showing in them discontinuity. There is a tradition that is a catastrophe”, en BENJAMIN, Walter, *Libro de los Pasajes*, Akal, Madrid, 2005, N 9, 4 (translation is mine)

49 BENJAMIN, Walter, *La dialéctica en suspenso, Fragmentos sobre la historia*, ed. Pablo Oyarzún Robles, Arcis-Lom, Santiago de Chile, p. 49

Contemporary art seems to reflect the hysteria of our society of information, its fear of losing memory and the temptation of transforming all the past into a file.

In reaction to the proliferation of information we search someone who selects the most relevant information, someone who does the job for us; or, simply, we try the short-cut of storing it all.

Christian Boltanski transforms himself into a preacher who teaches something of our past, and also into a clown that acts to satisfy our forgetful memory.

Only the time of History will confirm the importance of Christian Boltanski in the development of art. Nevertheless I am sure that in the memory of many persons who have been lucky to be able to contemplate his creations, Boltanski already have a place in their memories. The infinite and fragmentary time of the individual memory will have then to redeem the possible mistakes of the official History.