

# MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

collective unconscious

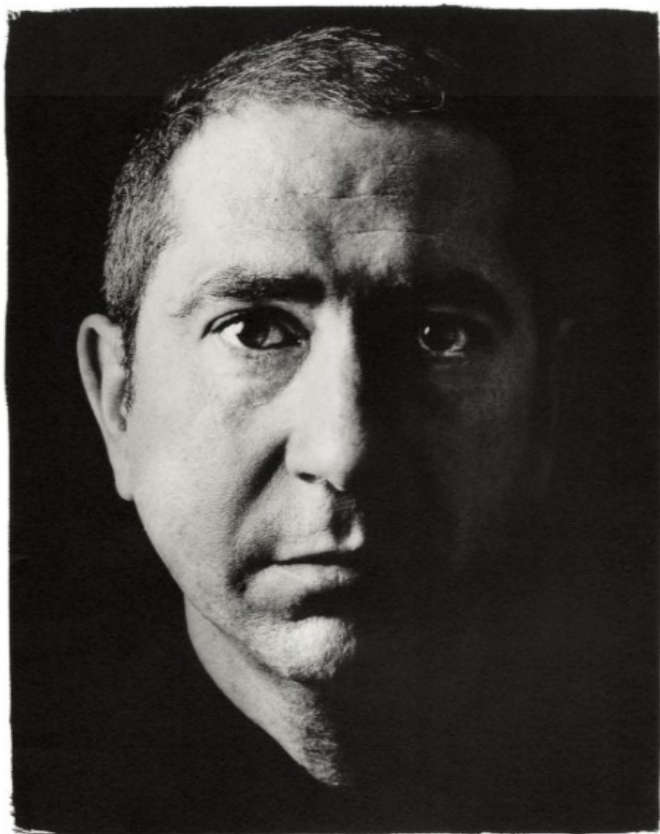
by nora landes

Photography, in essence, is about memory. Since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has been the medium of choice to document lived experience. Photographs immortalize the transitory, and in doing so, extend the life expectancy of a single moment as long as the object itself remains intact. Photographs serve as an externalization of memory; a single photographic image conjures up countless memories and associations, many of which would likely be forgotten had they not been captured on camera. It was only a matter of time until even human recollection would be replaced by a mechanical process. It is easier to look at a photograph and have memories instantly thrust upon us than it is to actively seek out such mental time capsules without the help of visual aids.

As we have come to rely on the mechanization of memory, however, we have taken for granted the complexities of human mental processes. The construction of memories involves more than just the absorption of experiences through empirical perception. One's memories do not correspond identically to what is seen. Memory has the power to form and reform. It adds and subtracts, alters and molds. In the end we cannot possibly keep our memory from acting upon every minute facet of our lives; including the images we see and how we process them. Yet when we look at photographs, there is more than just empirical perception and memory at work. Neither works independently. Imagination serves as the Kantian link between what we see and what we remember. Without such a capacity there is no way perception would have any correspondence to memory.

French artist Christian Boltanski exploits this interaction between perception, imagination, and memory to produce artworks that question the nature, even existence, of objectivity. In doing so, he is working within a philosophical idiom that stretches back to Aristotle. If the human imagination is capable of producing images in our minds that we have never perceived empirically, how are we to understand these images? Where do they come from? It was David Hume who said that although we can have ideas about things we have never directly encountered, these ideas can always be traced back to our own experience. However, our conscious and unconscious biases heavily influence how we think about things we ourselves have not even experienced.

Yet human memory cannot retain the vivacity we experience in the moment. As the clarity of experience fades, we lose our grip on the present. We become more susceptible to imagination's creative tendency. Photography throws for a loop the usually obvious distinction between perceived and imagined images. Boltanski's photo installations highlight the intricately-fabricated interplay between history, memory, and photography. His dramatic, large-scale pieces reclaim and engage both



Portrait by David Seidner, 1989. © International Center of Photography, David Seidner Archive.



our individual and collective memories; in fact, these art objects, these crumbling artifacts of lived experience, stand in place of our memories. What we know, or, rather, what we think we know, is replaced by what we see and how we come to understand it through our faculties of imagination and interpretation. Neither he nor the viewer knows anything about the subjects of his reclaimed and repurposed photographs. Knowing the identity of the subject relates little to the works as objects. Rather, the overwhelming anonymity of the subjects in such pieces as *Les Enfants de Dijon* and *Lycee Chases* allows for the viewer to relate to the works. Everyone can project their own memories onto the faces in Boltanski's photographs. Memory, not perception, becomes the common denominator.

This is for the better. Reducing our understanding of a work of art to what is presented to the viewer prevents the taint of partiality and bias from seeping in. Boltanski has said that many of his works speak of the horrors of the Holocaust, though any indication of such a theme is absent from the work. Without direct reference to this heinous event in human history, memory fills the void. History, itself a victim of memory's overarching influence, is quite literally absent from the picture. On the surface the Holocaust is not even a factor in one's understanding of his works. This is intentional. Any outright mention of the Holocaust in his pieces would color the viewer's interpretation. Even though the Holocaust may not be among the countless memories we carry through life, it is a part of our collective historical memory, one which comes with its own set of preconceptions. The imposition of Jewish themes on Boltanski's work brings with it an entirely new set of interpretations. The individual glowing photographs bring to mind memorial *Yahrzeit* candles lit to honor the dead. But this is not the point; Boltanski's works are meant to stand alone, free of any defining framework.

One of the artist's current projects involves filming his studio twenty-four hours a day and streaming the video feed to a remote cave in Tasmania until his own death, with no option of rewinding the tape and revisiting any single moment of his life until he has died. As simple as this project appears, it relies entirely on the flawed memory of the sole viewer, the art collector who owns the cave; it is Plato's allegory come to life. This reliance on memory and individual interpretation makes Boltanski's work achingly complex. He wants the viewer to conceive of his work through their own unique lens of understanding. In this way, Boltanski effectively removes himself from his art. He is but the master of ceremony. The viewer plays as much of a role in ascribing meaning as the artist. Throughout his artistic career Boltanski has worked in painting, sculpture, film, and photography, though when it comes down to it, Boltanski's medium of choice is concepts. His role in the work begins and ends with the creation of an idea and its corresponding visual presentation. He is a creator of objects, not of subjects, and certainly not meaning. The rest he leaves to memory.

