

Artur Kamczycki

Yizkor, the Jewish Way of Memory : the Case of Christian Boltanski's Art

Studia Europaea Gnesnensia 7, 309-326

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Artur Kamczycki
(Gniezno)

**YIZKOR, THE JEWISH WAY OF MEMORY.
THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI'S ART**

Abstract

Christian Boltanski's works, especially the photographic medium that he uses most often, refer to the old formulas of memory and commemoration used by Jews called Yizkor, which literally means, remember, recollect. Boltanski, by formalizing or even celebrating the impermanence and changeability of this medium, opposes the belief in permanence of a material object, which paradoxically contributes to the death of its implied idea, that is, memory. However, by negating the form, he does not negate memory but the false traditional belief in its stability and permanence.

Key words

Christian Boltanski, art of memory, Yizkor, countermonument, metonymy, photography

The Jewish context is extensively manifested in the contemporary artistic criticism and interpretation of Christian Boltanski's works¹. It does not only consist in references to Shoah but it is also about its art referring to memory as an important and eternal imperative in the Jewish culture and to the way and kind of presentation, that is, to the artistic language. Forms of expression and dialectics employed by this half-Jewish artist constitute a part of old memory modes still present in the Jewish culture, which today are defined in aesthetic and artistic categories².

The people of Israel are obsessed with remembering, recalling and dwelling upon the past: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill [...], remember the days of old, consider the generations long past" (Deut 32;7, 25;17), "Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand" (Ex. 13;3). Thus, memory is a core and an axis of the Jewish national consciousness. As an ethnic, social, cultural and religious imperative, it is a part of a formula which postulates that "a great part of our cultural efforts should focus not on collecting mementos of the past around ourselves, but on pulling ourselves around memory"³. In general, the post-Holocaust generations are burdened with a specific responsibility of memory — to recall constantly. However, first it needs to be established how to do it without "monumentalizing", "balming" or even trivializing the memory⁴. The so called "monumenting", seeking lasting forms of memory — as Andreas Huyssen says — reflects our conscious inclination

¹See for example: C. Grenier, D. Mendelsohn, Christian Boltanski, Flammarion Contemporary, Paris 2010; C. Grenier, *The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski*, London 1997.

²According to Dori Laub accounts of the Holocaust survivors do not only serve to keep the memory of Shoah. It is the memory of it, the Shoah, that is needed to "keep the victims alive" in a metaphorical sense. D. Laub, *An Event Without a Witness: Thruth, Testimony, and Survival*, [in:] S. Felman, D. Laub (ed.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York-London 1992, p. 78. See also: D. Laub, *Bearing Witness, or Vicissitudes of Listening*, [in:] Sh. Felman and D. Laub (ed.) as above p. 57-74. This formula, in my opinion, relates to the whole of the so called Jewish memory (as the backbone of the Jews' culture), understood as a cultural phenomenon that not only concerns the last 50 years but history as a whole.

³A. Huyssen, *The Monument in Post-Modern Age*, [in:] J.E. Young (ed.), *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, New York 1994, p. 11.

⁴For more about this kind of danger to art and memory see: P. Piotrowski, *Artysta w Auschwitz. O (nie)banalności sztuki*, [in:] P. Czaplinski, E. Domańska (ed.), *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania*, Poznań 2009, p. 291-307.

towards forgetting. The relentless attempts of transforming memory into memorials and other permanent forms of art constitute a tendency which is inversely proportional to the real intention of memory — they are our desire to forget⁵. The contemporary discourse of memory seems to be entangled in the “contextuality” of history as such. Systematic, archival researches of historians which purportedly reveal facts in their purest form provide us only with “a bit” of understanding of the Holocaust. Moreover, such an attempt protects us from the past by keeping it at bay⁶. So what should be done — as F. Ankersmit postulates — is to abandon the historical discourse and replace it with the discourse of memory because only memory respects the authentic⁷. According to F. Ankersmit, history of the Holocaust (as a science) should refer to aesthetics and not to factography. In his search of adequate Holocaust description forms, the author mentions *metonymy* (tools of art) which he juxtaposes with *metaphor* (tools of history) which in his view is a method of history-telling and a way of depicting historical facts. Metonymy, on the other hand, is memory and its application allows to point in the direction of the event and what is adjacent to it. In other words, the historians’ discourse should be substituted with the memory discourse because memory, being a form of nostalgia, gives us the difficult awareness of the distance to the object of the nostalgic longing⁸. Memory and nostalgia let us realize the unattainability of the historical object. The best way of communicating memory consists in aesthetic categories because “experiencing a piece of art will not be experiencing reality which is given to us as experiencing something”⁹.

Unlike historical archiving (history as such), art is one of the most important forms of mediating memory. It is about the permanent ability of artistic endeavor to evoke it — as a social, cultural and political perpetual carrier of memory as such.

⁵After: J. E. Young, *The Arts of Jewish Memory in Postmodern Age*, [in:] B. Cheyette, L. Marcus (ed.), *Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, Cambridge 1998, p. 211.

⁶See: S. Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, Massachusetts–London 1992, p. 91.

⁷F. Ankersmit, *Pamiętając Holocaust: żałoba i melancholia*, [in:] E. Domańska (ed.), *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Angloamerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych*, Poznań 2002, p. 1–2.

⁸See: E. Domańska, *Historia, o jeden świat za daleko*, Poznań 1997, p. 19.

⁹F. Ankersmit — in this context — compares works of an artist to a historian whose task is to develop a negative. F. Ankersmit, *Historia i Postmodernizm*, [in:] R. Nycz (ed.), *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*, Kraków 1997, p. 161.

It is Ch. Boltanski's works that refer to this "indexicality" of the matter of memory — where memory is juxtaposed with the referentiality of history. His artistic work responds to a sort of "anxiety" (J.E. Young, E. van Alphen, A. Appelfeld, A. Huyssen, S. Friedman and others) that does not want the commemorative art to become a soulless attempt of embalming the memory and does not want its effect to become opposite to the original purpose: forgetting instead of remembering¹⁰.

Boltanski's works — in particular the photographic medium that he uses most often¹¹ — brings to mind the old memory and commemoration formulas employed by the Jews, which are called Yizkor, literally meaning *recall*, *remember*. Moreover Yizkor is a special prayer for dead relatives said during the so called act of remembering the dead, especially on Yom Kippur holiday¹².

However, the key fact is that Yizkor also has its equivalent in the art of Jews; in the custom of making small, personal portrait forms by means of all kinds of plates, cameo brooches, pins, album inserts, pictures, paper cuts and photographs which are supposed to commemorate a given person. These small photographic portrait forms are most often put onto the east wall of a room in the house.

Photography — also understood here as the Barthesian "tool that extracts death"¹³ — is the main element of many of his projects and invokes the topic of passing; in particular, individual and collective memory. As Boltanski states himself: "what interests me in regard to photography is the connection with reality. We are sure — and it is because a photograph is made by a machine

¹⁰An interesting collection of reflections concerning this issue may be found in the book by Sh. Hornstein, F. Jacobowitz (ed.), *Image and Remembrance. Representation and the Holocaust*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2003.

¹¹In this context see: M. Bohm-Duchen, *The Uses and Abuses of Photography in Holocaust-Related Art*, [in:] Sh. Hornstein and F. Jacobowitz (ed.), *Image*, p. 220–234.

¹²What is more, according to the Notarikon method that constituted in creating words from the first letters of a given phrase, Yizkor comes from the words "May G-d remember the soul of my father (mother, brother, sister, etc.) who has gone to his [supernal] world. [...] [M]ay his soul be bound up in the bond of life with the souls of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and with the other righteous men and women who are in Gan Eden" after: A. Unterman, *Encyklopedia tradycji i legend żydowskich*, Warszawa 1994, p. 119.

¹³R. Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, Paris 1980 (*Światło obrazu. Uwagi o fotografii*, Warszawa 1996). Barthes, when discussing the process of taking photographs, compares it to overcoming death whereas being photographed, that is, trapping the model in the picture is sort of an act of objectifying.

— that the man we see in a picture must have existed. On the other hand, photography is also about the issue of the subject and its absence. It is no doubt because of this reason that photographs evoke thoughts of death — they are objects bringing to mind thoughts of the absent subject [...]. A picture is an object which lost its connection with the subject and at the same time is somehow connected with death¹⁴.

From the very beginning of its existence, photography among religious Jews was considered a so-called permitted visual medium. It performed the same function as silhouettes cut out of paper in order to commemorate the dead. The advantages that they highlighted included the flatness of the two-dimensional object and the mechanical process of its creation. It excluded photography from art, which was alien to Jewish culture. The matter of both paper figures and photography was viewed as a mundane and utilitarian product — unlike permanent stone sculptures that could be subject to acts of idolatry. Portraits would only show the head or the bust, never the whole person. Boltanski also says that what intrigues him about photography is that “it does not give in to judgment and it operates outside of the categories of a piece of art [...]”¹⁵. The artist obsessively alludes to the topic of a man by showing his face. Tamar Garb asked Boltanski why he was interested only in the face out of all body parts. He answered that the face “reveals the person’s soul”¹⁶.

The main reason behind the use of photography among religious Jews, with photos being displayed publicly only posthumously, was its capability of “preserving good memory”. Since the second half of the 19th century the main objects of photography were figures of rabbis, with the pictures having been reproduced in hundreds of copies and sold all around Europe¹⁷.

¹⁴Revenir, Chrystian Boltanski, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski) (14.09 — 11.11.2001), curator: Milada Śližińska, text from the Internet, www.csw.art.pl, p. 2 (December 2005).

¹⁵Conversation with Tamar Garb (Phaidon), text from the Internet, www.csw.art.pl, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski), p. 7 (December 2005).

¹⁶Ibidem, p. 6.

¹⁷Photographic rabbinic portraits referred to the quotation from the Book of Isaiah 30:20 — “yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers”. See: R.d Cohen, *Jewish Icons. Art. and Society in Modern Europe*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1998, p. 120–121.

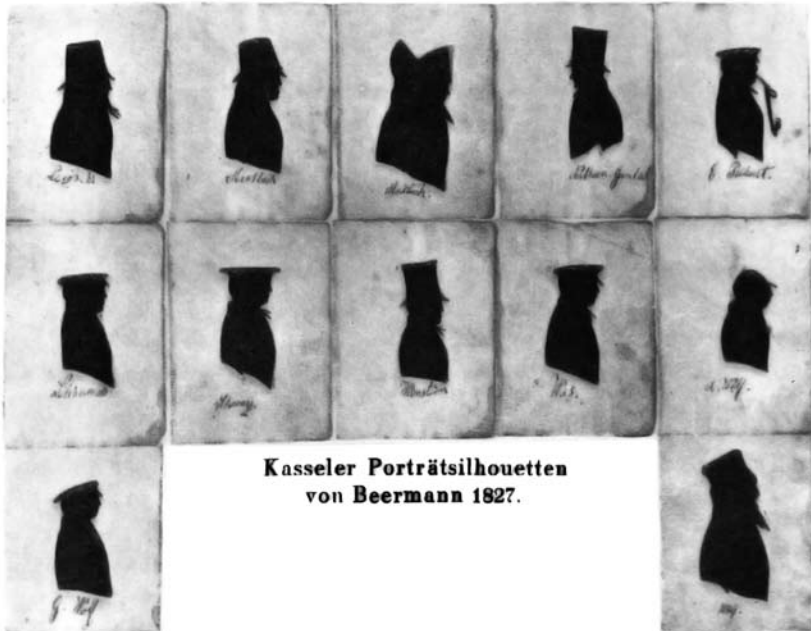


Fig. 1. Folded file depicting twelve black portrait silhouettes from 1827. The reverse of the file features an inscription saying “Dignified Jews from Kassel in Hesse have been immortalized in the silhouette portraits by one of their companions in faith”. The illustration comes from a book by Joseph and Jehudit Shadur entitled “Traditional Jewish Papercuts”, Hanover and London, 2001

The story of how one of the first 19th-century rabbinic photographs was created is very characteristic in this respect. It is a picture of Yehuda Ashod (1817–1866) who during his life had a considerable standing and had hundreds of students. At his funeral, when he was already dressed in a Sabbath robe and his body was about to be buried, his students decided to take a picture of him. The idea was approved of by the rabbis present at the funeral. He was put on a chair, his head and torso were straightened and a treaty was put in his hands. The picture was copied many times and was sold in the Jewish community of the Eastern and Central Europe¹⁸.

¹⁸This phenomenon of photographic, personal memento evokes the formula defined by Walter Benjamin in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. He



Fig. 2. Silhouette portraits by Simon Nathan (1746-1822) and his wife Grace Mendes Seixas Nathana (1752-1831), cut out as negatives in white paper and put against a black background. The illustration comes from “Traditional Jewish Papercuts”, Hanover and London, 2001, by Joseph and Jehudit Shadur

Apart from photography, it was also the aforementioned contour images that had a commemorative function (Yizkor). They were mainly profile figures cut out in paper and were called *oisszereniszen* in Yiddish¹⁹ (fig. 1, fig. 2). This commemorative practice dates back to the beginning of the 18th century and derives from shadow play, which was popular among the Jews. It also has its roots in the flatness of cut-out Hebrew letters²⁰. Letters in the Jewish tradition are sacred, with cutting them out and pasting being a form of adoration that is

claims that the desire of contemporary masses to gather objects around themselves is as strong as their tendency to overcome what is unique, special, temporary and disappearing in our reality by accepting its reproduction, [in:] H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, London 1968, p. 223.

¹⁹See: J., J. Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, (chapter 6, *Jews in Silhouette*), Hannover-London 2002, p. 183–190. Most often they were framed and put on the eastern wall of the house. One of the most distinctive artifacts of this kind is the book entitled “*Shades of My Forefathers*”, published in 1941 by Hannah London, which includes hundreds of family figures since the 18th century.

²⁰According to the Jewish tradition this method comes from the first half of the 14th century when the rabbi Shem Tow ben Yitzhak Arduziel, due to lack of ink started to cut out Hebrew letters from paper. This is how he later “wrote” the “treaty” entitled “The war of the pen against the scissors”. J., J. Shadur, *Traditional Jewish*, p. 19.



Fig. 3. Christian Boltanski, (*Les Regards*), *The looks* (1998), the illustration taken from a book by Ernst van Alphen entitled “*Caught by History. Holocaust Effect in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*”, Stanford 1997

similar to a prayer. This is why papercut figures, just like the letters, acquired a devotional and commemorative character²¹.

²¹For more about the role of writing as a cultural memory phenomenon see: J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, 2005. Polish version: (transl. by A. Kryczyńska-Pham), *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa 2008. See also: M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Kraków 2009.

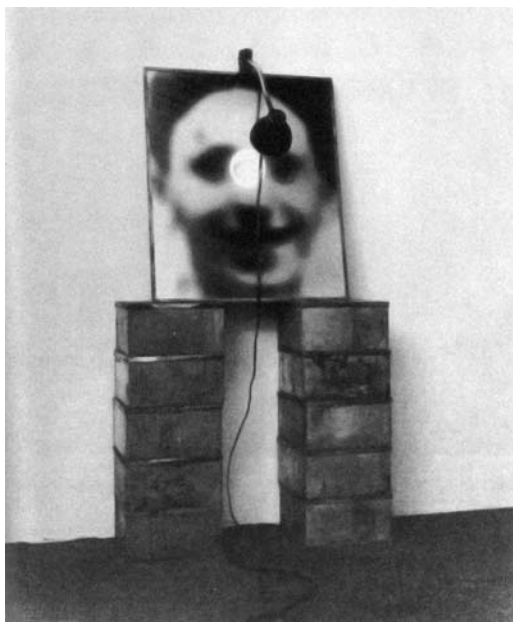


Fig. 4. Christian Boltanski, *Chases High School* (1988), detail, the illustration comes from: as above

There is a known case of Rabbi Jakob Koppel (Slovakia) whose students made such a figure after his death in 1837. The image that was put onto the east wall of a synagogue in “good memory” emphasized only his white beard and a fur cap, with other features of appearance remaining inconspicuous²². What matters is not a realistic depiction of a person but a medium which will commemorate the person in the memory of its authors. Silhouette portraits did not have to fully resemble the honored person — they were about the intention of preserving or sparking the memory of this person²³.

In a similar manner, most works of Boltanski, such as (fig. 3 “Looks”, fig. 4 “Chases High School”, detail, fig. 5 “Monument. The Purim Holiday”, or fig. 6. “Warsaw Citizens”) are blurred and fuzzy remakes of photos of Jews from Vienna or Warsaw where it is difficult to establish who the person in the photo is. By employing the effect of fuzzy and sort of disappearing figures, the artist does not show standard portrait photographs but only their contours. By zooming

²²See: R. Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, p. 135.

²³The papercuts — flat symbolic forms — were also created on death anniversaries (Yiddish: *yorzait*) and on anniversaries of events that were important for the deceased person.

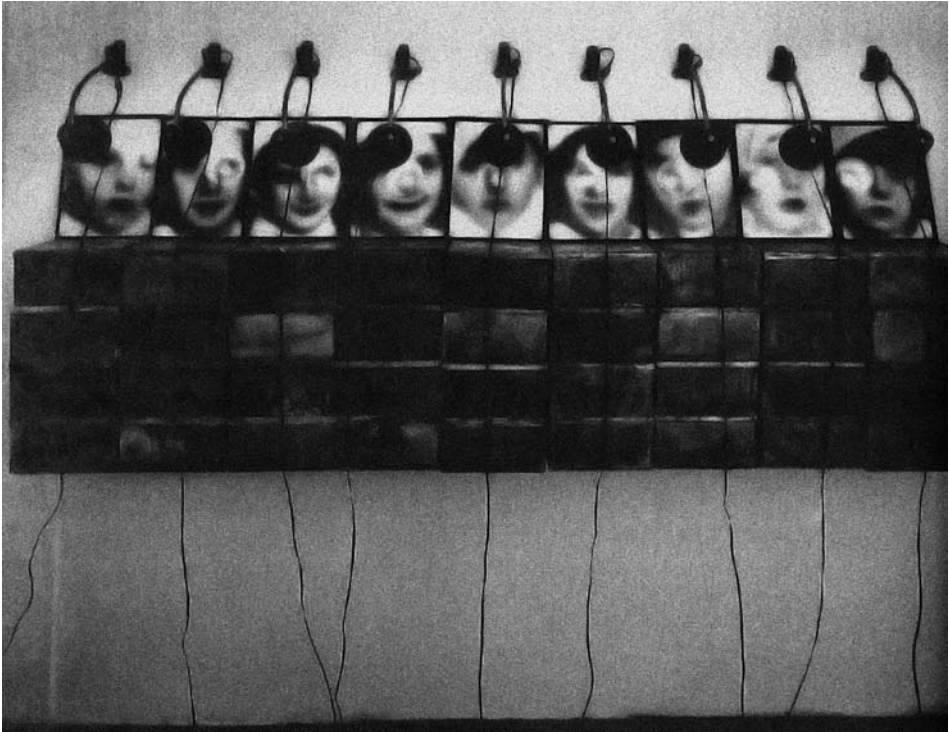


Fig. 5. Christian Boltanski, Monument. The Purim Holiday, (1989), the illustration comes from: as above

in the photo, he makes the face details disappear and achieves an impression of black and white spots or shadows which resemble the silhouette portraits. Neither the “silhouettes” nor Boltanski’s works correspond to the mimetic, true reality. They are only forms of memory evocation. They do not attempt to replace the person in the portrait but point to his or her absence, and thus to evoke memory. Portrait, being a special case of ontological values attributed to a given visualization, constitutes a reference to the person that was outside the portrait as such. Despite the fact that the person in the portrait is no longer a part of the contemporary world, the image belongs to our presence, or rather to the presence of our memory of this person²⁴.

²⁴H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York 1975, p. 131, after: E. van Alphen, *Caught by History. Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*, Stanford 1997, p. 101–102.



Fig. 6. Christian Boltanski, *Warsaw Citizens*, (2001), the illustration comes from: as above

Ch. Boltanski often includes sharp spotlights in his pictures that E. van Alphen compares to candles emphasizing the “memorial” aspect of his works (fig. 4, fig. 5)²⁵. Similarly, a candle (so called *nerot zikaron*; meaning ‘the light of memory’ in Hebrew) was added to the papercut portraits. The figures of the dead cut out in paper played the role of a personal, home or family memento. In this context, Boltanski’s art, by nurturing the memory of the dead, evokes the so called “little memory” which is connected with anonymous individuals. “Little memory — as Boltanski says — does not serve history. It encompasses individual knowledge”²⁶. It can be added that both the Jewish custom of photographing or cutting out silhouettes and Boltanski’s art are not attempts of

²⁵E. van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 108.

²⁶A. Rotenberg, [in:] *Revenir*.

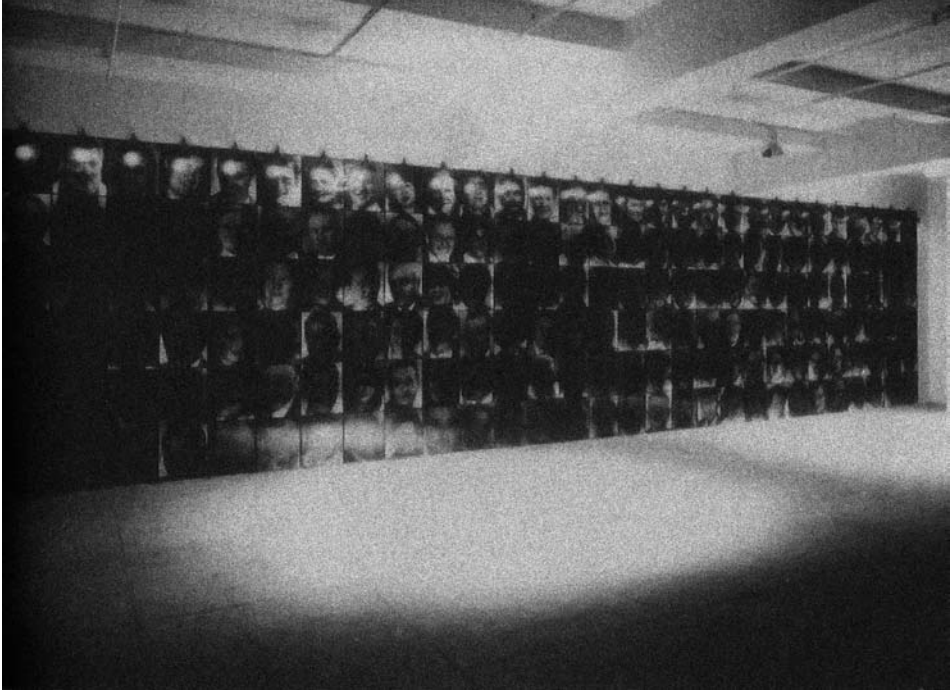


Fig. 7. Christian Boltanski, *The Dead Swiss* (1990), the illustration comes from: as above

“monumenting” an event or a person but they suggest a permanent struggle with memory²⁷.

What is important in the artist’s works apart from the commemorative aspect of individual portraits is the reference to the Jewish memory art (and “struggle with history”), as an act of a group representation. These are such works as “Warsaw Citizens” (fig. 6), “The Dead Swiss” (fig. 7) and “Menschlich” (consisting of images of 1600 people).

²⁷Such forms of commemoration have features of the so called counter-monument that is not about statuesque attempts of commemorating someone in a static, motionless form. A counter-monument is supposed to affirm memory by negating a one-time monumenting act. It manifests its ability to permanently update memory and is an active gesture towards the environment — unlike the traditional monument form which is socially passive. For more about this topic see: J.E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge. After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, New Haven–London 2000; idem, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven–London 1993 (especially Introduction), p. 1–16.



Fig. 8. Vienna volume coming from the end of the 19th century made by Israel Wiesen. Illustration of Richard Cohen's book "Jewish Icons", London, 1998

Generally, portraits that juxtaposed many different figures (both historic and contemporary) in the Jewish tradition played an important role of evoking memory. Group portraits used the same images in different configurations and were a common item in Jewish houses²⁸.

Two examples are worth mentioning here. The first one is a 19th-century Vienna volume by Israel Wiesen that depicts 147 figures from the modern Jewish history²⁹ (fig. 8). The photographs show Jewish musicians, artists, writers, politicians, scholars, constructors and others. The other example is a Wrocław lithograph coming from the second half of the 19th century published by Schotlander, depicting 40 "historical" rabbi portraits³⁰. It is worth noting that the

²⁸R. Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, p. 144–153.

²⁹There is an inscription on the back: So that the eyes of the Israeli could see the faces of their Torah teachers and religious authorities.

³⁰This gallery presents figures of completely different outlooks, from extremely orthodox to those representing extreme reformism. Their activity also refers to various geographical

dates of births and deaths (in this case) of the people in the lithographs stretch from the 12th to the end of the 19th century and no the time hierarchy is employed. This distinctive, a-historical representation of all of them at once constitutes conquering of the times in which they lived, thus, it is a triumph over the detailed nature of the context that the depicted people were remembered in. However, the chain of the Jewish time continuity represented here by the rabbis reaches the point where the viewer finds himself and further creates the chain of continuity and identity³¹. The peculiar time non-hierarchization accentuated in the structure of this object can be explained from the perspective of the Jewish culture. The religious, biblical tradition of Jews, especially the cabbalist one, perceives the time as non-linear. Linear time belongs to the profane. But according to the religious Jews “there is time that is characterized by real continuity instead of temporariness. It is the same time that exists next to us as the eternity from which the time emerged”³². Facts in the time space are not a linear, vectorial and evolutionary sequence of events but rather points on this time surface. Nothing which is historically positive, lasting, permanent or advantageous for the development of civilization (lack of the notion of historical evolution) is created in the Jewish historicism understood in this sense. Historicism as a way of overcoming time is unfamiliar to the Jewish religious tradition and thus it is difficult to find here phenomena of peoples’ and things’ historicity. The calendar used by the Jews is related to the profane time and does not try to overcome or subdue the eternity and, therefore, it does not constitute a base for thinking about the notions of time and its dimension³³. It is independent from the Jewish concept of waiting, that is, the fluid and boundless character of the messianic, mythical time³⁴.

places: from Seville to Vilnius. Some of the figures included in the photomontage were unrecognizable as far as the 19th century.

³¹See: R. Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, p. 147.

³²M. Gruna-Sulisz, *Świątynia jerozolimska jako kosmogoniczne centrum świata*, [in:] P. Paszkiewicz, T. Zadrozny (ed.), *Jerozolima w kulturze europejskiej*, Warszawa 1997, p. 366.

³³It was based on the synthesis of sun and moon phases and it stems from the need of an astrological-natural cycle orientation, with years marking the number of cycles. Jewish holidays such as Passover or Sukkot referred to agricultural aspects of everyday life and thanksgiving for the harvest.

³⁴See: S. Stern, *Time and Proces in Ancient Judaism*, Oxford 2007.

The mythical time is considerably different from the historical time³⁵. It is sort of limitless, without reference points, whereas the historical time needs constant legitimization through references to the present — it needs the points on the timeline to be continuously marked. On the other hand, the events that we want to preserve are meaningful only through references to the mythical time, to eternity. We want them to last and this is why we try to keep them in the (mythical) memory. It is art that is supposed to achieve this goal. Art is a medium and a medium always belongs to the sphere of historical time which is changeable and temporary. So the attempt of preserving “eternal” memory by a “one-time” monumenting act is pointless. It is natural for a material piece of art to disintegrate or to have its context changed when memory still needs to be preserved. Memory exists beyond the work or monument (a piece of art is only its temporary incarnation).

Ch. Boltanski’s “method” of constructing installation refers to the same aspect of constructing memory beyond the historical time. The artist uses the same photographs for various works; he disintegrates, dismantles and deconstructs them, thus evoking the idea of a counterwork or counter-monument. Boltanski’s statement is very relevant in this context: “I remember when Tate Gallery bought from me «The Dead Swiss» on shelves with white cotton. The curator was afraid that the cotton would turn yellow after a few years. So I said that I could replace it. He also mentioned the photographs would fade and I replied by saying that I could find more dead Swiss people and that I did not care if it were the same or different people [...]. The curator asked: But what have bought? I replied: you have bought photographs of dead Swiss people and shelves with white cotton. Not an object but an idea”³⁶. Such an idea of a work formalizes or even celebrates its impermanence and opposes the belief of a material object being permanent, which paradoxically contributes to the death of its implied idea, that is, memory³⁷. Boltanski does not negate memory

³⁵See: Y. Garber-Talmon, *The Concept of Time in Primitive Myth*, Iyyun II, 1951, p. 57.

³⁶According to Boltanski: “A good work of art is never unambiguous. My works are full of contradictions. A piece of art is open and created by the viewers who use their own background, experiences [...]. Each work can be perceived in many ways. A work needs to be a little «blurred» so that everyone can find in it something that is also theirs”. *Conversation with Tamar Garb*, p. 5.

³⁷R. Mumfort after: J.E. Young, *The Texture*, p. 1–16. The time, using linear progression, pulls old meanings into new contexts and isolates them from both the past and the present exposing them to the danger of being ridiculed. Instead of memory itself we have a play between

by negating the form but it is the false belief in its constancy and permanence that he rebukes. He stimulates memory keeping in mind its evolution and he reflects the relativity of all meanings and memories. By drawing attention with its ephemeral existence, the counterwork mocks the blind trust put in the history by traditional works of “commemoration” and, therefore, revives the idea of memory by contradicting the reasons behind its own creation. E. van Alpern writes in the context of Boltanski’s art that the alleged stories evoked by the artist’s works are equally related to the past as well as our times. The cultural responsibility that our generations have been burdened with is to preserve or initiate the relation with the past in order to integrate it with our present times³⁸.

Boltanski’s art does not try to be a presentation of the Holocaust that is subject to realistic modes; it is non-narrative. It does not create an illusion of a transparent entrance to real and historical events and does not represent the archiving formula by e.g. references to camp photographs, but evokes the idea of archiving (as an institution) rather than archived objects, photographs³⁹. His archiving convention — through suggestion of segregation, collecting, ordering and labelling evokes historical methodology but does not constitute this methodology — it is only an archival suggestion, an aesthetic mode or attempt⁴⁰. Some works are entitled simply *Inventories* or *Archives* and at the same time they do not appropriate real archival objects. The archive shows reality whereas art only suggests its re-presentation. This historicist factography rather constitutes an act of repression that does not have any germs of the retrospective character and is a kind of canvas woven of “external” facts that wraps the “inner truth”. It does not refer to experience but rather makes experiencing impossible. Thus, we should change the historic (factographical) categories understood as

memory and history initiated by time thanks to which memory is maintained and not negated (as in a traditional monument).

³⁸E. van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 93–94.

³⁹In this context, Michael Kimmelman asks about the boundary between the inquiring mind of a historian and the passion of a peeper and wonders if photographic documentation of the Holocaust is a sophisticated kind of pornography, after: Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Art Confronts the Holocaust*, [in:] M. Bohm-Duchen (ed.), *After Auschwitz: Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, London 1995, p. 73.

⁴⁰E. van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 95.

abominable attempts of experiencing events (empathy) to more appropriate aesthetic categories, that is, to art⁴¹.

Boltanski's art is both a suggestive play with history and its criticism at the same time.

The ineffectiveness of the attempts to capture these blurred and fuzzy works and to sharpen them makes us aware that — just like the aforementioned Jewish mode of memory — an ordered and clear picture of history is unattainable. It shows us what is absent constantly evoking only memory.

Artur Kamczycki

YIZKOR, ŻYDOWSKA FORMA PAMIĘCI.

PRZYKŁAD CHRISTIANA BOLTANSKIEGO

Streszczenie

Twórczość Christiana Boltanskiego odnosi się do pamięci jako odwiecznego imperatywu żydowskiej kultury, jak również do sposobu i rodzaju przedstawienia, czyli języka artystycznego. Jednak artysta nie czyni tego w drodze prostej aluzji do Shoah, ale przez odniesienie się do "indeksalności" istoty pamięci (F. Ankersmith) — gdzie pamięć przeciwstawiona jest referencyjnej naturze historii. Twórczość Boltanskiego jest odpowiedzią na pewien rodzaj "lęku" (J.E. Young, E. Van Alphen, A. Appelfeld, A. Huyssen, S. Friedman) przed możliwością uczynienia ze sztuki bezdusznej próby zabalsamowania pamięci, której wpływ będzie odmienny od zamierzonego, tzn. będzie się ona przyczyniała do zapomnienia (anty-pomnik).

W przeciwieństwie to historycznej archiwizacji (historii jako takiej) sztuka jest jedną z najistotniejszych form zachowywania pamięci, dzięki nieustającej zdolności działania artystycznego do przywoływania wspomnień, jako społeczny, kulturowy i polityczny wieczny ruch, który służy pamięci jako takiej.

Dzieła Christiana Boltanskiego, a zwłaszcza medium fotografii, którym najczęściej się posługuje, nawiązuje do stosowanych przez Żydów dawnych formuł pamięci i upamiętniania zwanych Yizkor, co w dosłownym tłumaczeniu oznacza pamiętać, przypominać.

⁴¹For more see: A. Appelfeld, *After the Holocaust*, [in:] B. Lang, A. Appelfeld (ed.), *Writhing and the Holocaust*, Michigan 1988, p. 83–92.

Takie konceptualne ujęcie pracy, czyli formalizacja, a nawet celebrowanie nietrwałości i zmienności medium, przeczy wierze w trwałość materialnego przedmiotu, paradoksalnie prowadzącej do śmierci implikowanej przez niego idei, czyli pamięci. Niemniej, negując formę, Boltanski nie neguje pamięci, a jedynie błędne, utrwalone tradycją przekonanie o jej stabilności i trwałości.

Tym samym jego sztuka staje się zarówno sugestywną grą z historią, jak i jej krytyką. Artysta pokazuje nam obecność tego co nieobecne przez ciągle przywoływanie wspomnienia i tylko wspomnienia.