

## Christian Boltanski

(Paris, France, 1944 - 2021)

“Early in my life, I spoke of my childhood and described so many things that were so false, I can no longer stand it. I have an old fool of a grandfather, a wicked father... I fabricated a childhood that is the common denominator for each of us. The more I work, the more I tend to disappear” (*Christian Boltanski*, Charta, 1997, p. 36). The dialogue between individual and multitude, personal pain and collective tragedy, realism and fictionalized narration, has animated the work of Christian Boltanski since the 1970s. Acclaimed as one of the most renowned living French artists, Boltanski likes to call himself a painter, although he has not touched canvas since the late 1960s. Nevertheless the installations he creates, using a variety of materials and objects, above all clothing, candles, photographs, and electric lights, maintain a strongly emotional character that can more easily be connected to painting, understood as the expressive means par excellence. Time is always central to his work—the way it flows in our memory, its capacity to lose details, and the human desire to thwart inevitable oblivion.

In one of his most well-known projects, *Archives du Coeur* (*Archive of the Heart*), Boltanski collects and records millions of heartbeats, perhaps the most personal and individual sound, but one that is difficult to distinguish and destined to be extinguished immediately after death. Against this fate, the archive imposes a desperate attempt at memory. And it is of memory, and inevitably of death, that the two works in the CRT collection—*Containers* (2010) and *Children* (2011)—speak. They address some of the French artist’s favorite themes, with the goal of constructing through objects that have no pretext to being documentary, a touching narration. Boltanski was born at the end of the Second World War, to a Jewish father and a Christian mother, a reason why the Holocaust remains vivid in his memory and becomes an emblematic tragedy and the greatest example of dramatic dehumanization. The used clothing contained in the three large carts in *Containers*—clothing that often appears in this French artist’s work, even in monumental installations like those shown at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2010 or at the Armory in New York in 2011—are synecdochic representations for the masses of deported persons, for their depersonalization: trousers, sweaters, different sizes, interchangeable, anonymous. Thus in the photos of twelve children portrayed in *Children*, we see their penetrating glances, illuminated by a cold neon light, yet at the same time their faces are out of focus, illegible, so that they are ordinary, forgotten, and forgettable. The features of the face, those that most characterize a person, and clothing, personal effects par excellence, become a mute mass, dominated by circumstances and by fate. (EV)