Christian Boltanski’s Memory Images: Remaking French Museums in the Aftermath of ’68

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Since the moment when revolutionaries opened the royal palace at the Louvre to the citizens of France, redefining its treasures as belonging to the citizenry rather than the king, French art and museums have been considered privileged national property.1 Over the years, French museums came to be seen not merely as sites for the exhibition of art, but also as crucial symbols of national identity and repositories of collective memory. Yet by 1968, what had been powerful symbols of the democracy and openness of the French state had come to appear to activists as elitist, outdated, and removed from the daily lives of French people. When artists, art students, and critics, along with striking workers and university students, took to the barricades in May of ’68 with the aim of transforming French society, the art institutions of the time became a critical site in the larger battle, with proposals ranging from abolishing traditional concepts of art and museums to creating more democratic and accessible venues for contemporary art. Yet after the demonstrations and protests of ’68 had subsided, the problem of how to re-imagine artistic practices and venues remained. When President Pompidou announced plans in 1969 for the new national museum of modern art that would eventually become part of the Pompidou Centre, the question of how to shape a response to the criticisms raised in 1968 became a central concern of public policy.

This essay considers how the work of Christian Boltanski, a young French artist, came to be promoted as a powerful solution to the problem of how to address the demands for democratic art and museums. The personal and everyday materials incorporated into Boltanski’s work, such as family photographs and childhood memorabilia, were heralded by critics as making the museum more accessible and inclusive; by calling on viewers’ memories with such objects, critics argued, the work opened space in the museum for the uniqueness of personal experience, providing new ways for viewers to access and identify with previously unrepresented experiences, while making the museum a collective site of identification (Fig. 1). This interpretation has dominated Boltanski’s critical reception to the present day and has helped encourage Boltanski’s more recent rise in popularity in North America over the past fifteen years, as museums, spurred on by the demands of movements for multiculturalism, made increasing efforts to reach out to new constituencies. Yet while the interpretation of Boltanski’s memory images as emblems of inclusiveness and accessibility has rendered them powerfully appealing to museums at moments when the stakes for their institutional relevance are extremely high, it depends on an assumption that Boltanski’s materials bridge the gap between personal and collective memory in a straightforward fashion. Rather than taking this for granted, I return to Boltanski’s materials and their forms of presentation, placing them back into their historical as well as institutional settings, and argue that Boltanski’s memory images simultaneously appealed to viewers’ identification and highlighted the gaps between personal memory and the collective audience of the museum. Far from demonstrating a path towards a revolutionised and

democratic museum, then, Boltanski’s work continues to challenge the idea of the museum as a representation of collective culture. This essay reconstructs the challenges that were raised to French museums in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and focuses on the summer of 1972, when both the plans for the new French museum and interpretations of Boltanski’s work were still being elaborated. It examines how one interpretation of Boltanski’s work – an interpretation that seemed to respond to the demands of ’68 for accessible art and museums, while simultaneously fitting well with state cultural goals – became popularised, overshadowing his work’s challenges to the project of rebuilding the museum.

French Museums and Cultural Democracy

On 18 May, amid the protests of 1968, a crowd of students, artists, and critics gathered outside the Musée National d’Art Moderne and went so far as to close it, charging that the museum was a ‘cemetery’, and art ‘a corpse’, sealed off from ‘contemporary life’. For them, as well as a number of vocal factions on the left, the only way to improve the museum was to abolish it in order to demystify art and merge it with daily life. Yet among other activists, critics, and curators at the time, there was also a real desire to determine how to reform the museum. Those who wanted to grapple with the roles of the museum sought to rethink the longstanding tradition of French patrimony and the more recent attempts at cultural democracy that were developed by André Malraux in the 1960s.

In 1959, when he was named the first Minister of Culture by Charles de Gaulle, Malraux began a major project to democratise culture by making works of French artistic heritage available to as large an audience as possible through the use of photography. His famous text Le Musée imaginaire, for instance, combined photographic reproductions of great masterworks that spanned the ages, arguing that historically distant works could be freed from the chronology of the museum and brought together in new relations in the imagination of the spectator. In addition, Malraux favoured the development


Fig. 1. Christian Boltanski, Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, (detail), 1971. 150 silver gelatin photographs, each 20 x 30 cm. Frac Rhône-Alpes; housed at the Musée d’art moderne, Saint-Etienne.
of cultural centres called *maisons de la culture* as a means to make great works of art and reproductions available to audiences throughout France. Malraux thus intended the *maisons de la culture* to promote cultural cohesion, binding the nation together with what he saw as the shared history and values embodied in art. In this way, the *maisons de la culture* would function as reservoirs of cultural memory and points of national identification. Malraux’s vision of cultural democracy, then, was one of extension, in which an already agreed-upon set of masterworks was diffused more widely; it was an appropriate vision for a minister in a conservative government which aimed to advance national unity rather than to transform the very notion of national culture itself.

Malraux’s goal that the *maisons de la culture* should perform a unifying function was a response to a very real sense of disintegration in the French community following the Second World War. Herman Lebovics has argued that Malraux promoted national unity through a common French culture as a means to combat on the cultural front the growing factions of post-war French society. These factions had been intensified by the regionalism of the Vichy years, the decline of French political prestige, the colonial wars for independence, and the social dislocations attendant upon economic modernisation, urbanisation, and an increasingly migratory population. As Emile Biasini, Malraux’s adviser, claimed, the cultural work of the nation could play a critical role in fostering national cohesion: ‘For, as varied and multiple in its diversity as it may be, deep down the country is solidly united; beyond doubt, its accumulated cultural capital has been the most binding cement of a community which appears so factious on the surface.’

In 1968, however, Malraux’s concepts of democratic culture came under fire. Different constituencies, including artists, museum administrators, critics, scholars, and students rejected Malraux’s idea of the universality of art and critiqued the class biases of cultural institutions. Many feared that art was being used to maintain the status quo and demanded that the museum be made truly democratic. One of the foundational critiques was Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Love of Art*, which was first published in 1966 and frequently cited in 1968 by activists as both evidence of the class bias of museums and an articulation of how it was perpetuated. In his sociological analysis of art museums, Bourdieu renounced the concept of cultural democracy that Malraux had advanced, contending that the idea of national culture as universally accessible – transcending divisions and particularities – ignored the socio-economic and familial inequalities that conditioned audiences’ abilities to approach art. Although museums supposedly offered equal access to the national patrimony, in reality they remained the domain of middle- and upper-class visitors who had learned from their families the background necessary for appreciating art. Bourdieu thus concluded that incorporating art education into the national curriculum was the only comprehensive means by which to compensate for familial disadvantages and produce large numbers of students competent in art, thereby achieving universal participation in national culture.

Activists in May and June 1968 frequently adopted these terms to describe the class biases of the museum and the *maisons de la culture*. But many of them went beyond Bourdieu’s program – which held on to traditional notions of national culture, museums, and academic preparation – and challenged the imposition of the culture of the elite on the public at large, arguing for an alternative view of art based on daily life that Malraux and Bourdieu had ignored. In their challenges to art education, for example, activists were not satisfied with the idea of extending traditional art education to a wider population, as Bourdieu had imagined; rather they demanded that art
education be revolutionised by departing entirely from its academic foundation. Instead of students emulating the tradition of the masters, students joined with workers in activist collaborations such as the ateliers populaires, to produce art that used modern techniques and responded to immediate political concerns, hoping to fill the spaces of everyday life rather than the walls of museums and galleries. These targeted attacks as well as widespread protests against cultural institutions forced the directors of the maisons de la culture to confront their objections.

Beginning on 20 May 1968, the directors of the maisons de la culture met in Villeurbanne, near Lyon, to respond to the critiques that had been launched against their institutions. The document they produced is telling for the extent to which it summarises and accepts these critiques. The directors, like Bourdieu, acknowledged that museum audiences were largely middle and upper class, and admitted that they had not succeeded in enlarging the public for art. The directors also pushed beyond Bourdieu’s ideas and sought to address protestors’ demands, calling for new methods of art education and innovative forms of art based in daily life that would be instrumental in forming political self-consciousness in all sectors of the public.

Mindful of the new challenges that were emerging in the streets, the art schools, and the museums all around them, the directors produced a signed statement that described the problems in the current operations of their art institutions and drafted a resolution for fostering more democratic culture:

The mere “diffusion” of works of art... has come to seem less and less capable of producing a real encounter between these works and the vast numbers of men and women who are struggling with all their might to survive in society, but who, in many respects, remain excluded from it. While obliged to participate in the production of material goods, they are deprived of the means of contributing to the way in which society is run...

Whatever the purity of our intentions, in reality our attitude appears to a considerable number of our fellow citizens to reflect the preference of a privileged few for a culture that is hereditary and particularist – that is to say, for a bourgeois culture.

The directors renounced Malraux’s humanist idea of the universality of culture and concluded that the art of the maisons de la culture was ‘hereditary’ and ‘bourgeois’. They rejected Malraux’s plan for decentralising art by ‘diffusion’ – using museums and photography to bring works of art to large numbers of people. Merely making art physically accessible, they recognised, did little to include those who ‘remained excluded’ from political, economic, and cultural domains of society. They argued that a ‘non-public’ existed, comprised of people who did not have the opportunity to understand or contribute to culture. By making groups who were unfamiliar with culture feel that they did not belong, museums made them inclined to accept their own exclusion and subordination.

Like Bourdieu, the directors saw art education as a means to diminish the exclusion of the economically disenfranchised from the cultural sphere, yet they went further by reconsidering how art and art education had been conceived and promoted by public institutions. Instead of a pre-determined set of cultural objects and interpretations that would simply be transmitted to the public, as both Malraux and Bourdieu had advocated, one from a right-wing and one from a left-wing perspective, they drew on ideas that had been advanced beginning in the 1930s by champions of popular culture, arguing for a different form of cultural activity, one that derived from the public’s interests and needs. New education methods would be based on ‘an entirely different conception that does not a priori refer to particular pre-existing

9. ‘Une conception entièrement différente qui ne se réfère pas à un contenu préexistant mais qui attend de la seule rencontre des hommes la définition progressive d’un contenu qu’ils puissent reconnaître’. Jeanou, *L’Action culturelle*, p. 120.

10. ‘Se libérant toujours mieux des mystifications de tous ordres qui tendent à le rendre en lui-même complice des situations réelles qui lui sont infligées’. Jeanou, *L’Action culturelle*, p. 120.

11. The statement ended by calling for the budget for cultural affairs to be increased from 0.43% to 1% of the national budget. The 1969 budget for cultural affairs, however, was not increased, and funding for the *maisons de la culture* declined. Several municipalities that had been hostile to the *maison* withdrew funding, making it difficult for the state to finance them fully. A number of the directors who were part of the Villeurbaine committee were forced to leave their posts. Cabanne, *Le Pouvoir Culturel*, pp. 236–7.

12. Even though ethnographic museums represented the everyday affairs of cultures, they were not politically benign. By taking an object as a representation of a culture, they obscured the potential for variations among objects and fostered the illusion of a homogeneous culture. Furthermore, the intellectual influence of structuralism in the 1960s, which transported the same western categories from place to place rendering all cultures comparable, contributed to flattening out the representation of the exhibited cultures. Moreover, many of the exhibited objects had been obtained through colonial exploits, and were used to suggest the superiority of French culture, which was not exhibited, but used to derive the categories by which other cultures were compared. For these reasons, audiences today might be surprised that ethnographic museums were not targeted by protesters in ’68, yet the colonial aspects of ethnographic museums were rarely discussed as such at the time.


contents but waits for a meeting with the people for the progressive definition of content that they can recognise’. Meaning would thus derive from individuals’ encounters with art, during which they recognised content that was relevant to their daily lives. The directors believed that this process of discovering meaning in art would help the ‘non-public’ out of its isolation, by helping people to see themselves in a social and historical context and ‘to liberate themselves better from the mystifications of all orders that tend to make them complicit in the actual situations that are inflicted upon them’.

These individuals would no longer remain victims of social, economic, and cultural marginalisation; seeing their lives and experiences reflected in art would help them understand the commonalities of their situation with that of others and empower them to improve it. Whereas Bourdieu focused on the educational system as the locus of his plan, the directors believed it was necessary to adapt art institutions to these new educational and cultural experiences. Although they pushed for innovative forms of cultural activity, their statement remained unclear as to what specific forms of art and education would be adopted and left the future of cultural programming uncertain. As museums would reconstruct themselves in the aftermath of ’68, it was clear they would need to engage the challenges of daily life and incorporate individuals who previously had been excluded from cultural institutions.

Following protestors’ calls for levelling artistic hierarchies and turning to the everyday as a source for art, certain artists, critics, and curators came to view objects in ethnographic museums as an alternative to the masterworks of art museums. Ethnographic museums, such as the influential Musée de l’Homme, purported to represent collective culture through what were considered ‘objets témoins’, a concept developed by Paul Rivet and George Henri Rivière, the Director and Deputy Director of the museum in the early 1930s. Their concept of objets témoins influenced reinstallections of the museum’s collections in the decades that followed and was disseminated through the course that Rivière taught on the history of museology up until the 1960s. Rivet and Rivière were not interested in the aesthetics or rarity of the ethnographic objects (such as weapons, utensils, and clothing arranged in vitrines); they saw the objects as artisanal, revealing the traits and characteristics of the cultural system in which they were produced.

The concept of objets témoins also suggested that within the ethnographic museum all objects were equal in value and significance as representations of cultures. After the ’68 protests, in which the model of the masterwork came under fire, the idea of representing everyday life that the ethnographic museum proposed seemed to offer an opportunity for revitalisation.

The Expo ’72 and Boltanski’s *Ethnologisme*: Exhibiting Everyday Life in the Museum

In the aftermath of ’68, a number of the *maisons de la culture* closed, and artists and curators continued to grapple with the problem of how to re-imagine artistic practices and venues. This pressure intensified when President Pompidou, de Gaulle’s successor, appointed a curatorial team to plan an immense exhibition for the summer of 1972 to showcase the artwork and approaches that would be used in the new national museum. Titled *12 Ans d’art contemporain en France*, and otherwise known as the Expo ’72, the exhibition featured the work of seventy-two contemporary artists and was the first major state-sponsored showing of contemporary art in France since 1968. Given the task of organising a major retrospective of recent art and eventually a new
museum, the curators could not avoid addressing the protests launched against the museum in 1968 and its aftermath. The response to this project was by no means overwhelmingly positive. Many artists feared a return to the governmental administration of the arts that they had denounced in ’68. Other artists opposed this attempt to organise art in the service of the power embodied by the president. A number of artists refused to participate in the Expo ’72, launched petitions and letters of opposition, and demonstrated at the opening of the exhibition.

One artist who did participate, and who attained a national prominence that has persisted to this day, was Christian Boltanski. Indeed, from the outset of his career, Boltanski remained silent at moments when exhibitions triggered political debate. During the May demonstrations, for instance, he chose to exhibit his work in an alternative space, the Ranelagh movie theatre, rather than taking it to the streets. In the years of upheaval that followed 1968, he did not boycott exhibitions, as some of his fellow artists decided to do, but instead sought to find ways of exhibiting critically within them. At the very beginning of the 1970s, his career was beginning to take off, and his reputation was solidified by the Expo ’72. There, Boltanski displayed works that engaged conventions and forms more common to ethnographic museums than to fine art museums, such as his Vitrines (Fig. 2) – ethnographic display cases containing photographs, balls of dirt, and tool-like objects that resembled objects he had made as a child – as well as his Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood 1944–1950, a booklet documenting his childhood memorabilia (Figs. 3–5). These ethnographic presentations appealed to museum curators, who viewed them as a way to achieve an egalitarian representation of collective culture that seemed to present a solution to their debates about the direction of cultural policy, a clear response to the 1968 calls for democratic art that engaged the everyday. But the curators would also use his work to reconstruct an image of collective, national culture – a prospect that the activism of ’68 had sought to undermine. With the reconstruction of the museum as their primary objective, curators downplayed the more critical elements of Boltanski’s work that challenged the museum as a representation of collective culture.

Jean Clair, one of the Expo ’72 curators, discussed Boltanski’s work in the exhibition catalogue as well as in Art en France: une nouvelle génération, his influential book on the state of contemporary art in France. In these texts, which constituted the first extended critical exploration of Boltanski’s work,

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14. Although little documentation exists of this exhibit, the two accounts we have describe a short film titled La Vie impossible de Christian Boltanski and displays of mannequins in small, room-like chambers, demonstrating that Boltanski was working in a mode different from that of the poster-makers of the ateliers populaires, for example. See Bernard Marcadé, ‘La vie impossible de Christian Boltanski’, Parachute, no. 55, July–September 1989, pp. 4–8 and Lynn Gumpert, Christian Boltanski (Flammarion: Paris, 1994), p. 181.
Clair brought together the ideas that he had been exploring as an art critic and editor of the contemporary art journal *Chroniques de l’art vivant*. Boltanski’s *Vitrines* and *Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood*, Clair contended, brought the aesthetic into the ‘ethnologic’ realm, and could have been presented with the ethnographic collections at the Musée de l’homme. Boltanski, Clair implied, displaced the model of artistic creativity described in Malraux’s *Musée Imaginaire*, whereby each artist drew upon a canon of masterworks to develop his contribution, by looking to the ethnographic museum as a source of inspiration. Like the objects in an ethnographic museum, the diverse objects collected in Boltanski’s *Vitrines* and *Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood*, such as photographs, bits of clothing, and a lock of hair, were ‘devoid of any artistic interest’.15 With his essay’s framing of Boltanski’s humble objects, Clair implicitly addressed the concerns of those who felt Malraux’s emphasis on great masterworks had forced the culture of the elite on the public at large, by suggesting that Boltanski provided a more accessible, everyday, ‘ethnographic’ alternative.

Furthermore, Clair suggested, Boltanski’s ethnographic objects provided a view of the collectivity of culture more than the subjectivity of the artist, and, indeed, tended to undermine the privileging of the individual artist’s subjectivity that had been so key to models of the genius and the masterwork that were rejected in ’68. In speaking of the photographs and texts Boltanski assembled in the *Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood* to represent his youth, Clair claimed that the dates that accompanied the photos contradicted one another and the characters in the photographs were never the same from one image to the next. Clair argued that the images were bits from others’ lives and that ‘Christian Boltanski’ was a mythical personality that the artist had created to refer to everyone. By systematically combining the information presented in the work, Boltanski caused his own personality to disappear: ‘he erases history – that of the individual, the artist, the “I”,’ suggesting that he effaced the individual artist to provide a collective and egalitarian view of culture.16

Whereas in the Expo ’72 catalogue Clair advanced Boltanski’s *ethnologisme* as an anti-elitist representation of collective culture over individual subjectivity, achieved within the museum and perhaps pointing the way to its redemption, in a separate article Clair acknowledged a much more critical strand in Boltanski’s work that he did not bring to light in the context of the catalogue for the show that was to establish the practices and policies of the new French museum. Boltanski, he argued, tested the limits of museum structures: by placing private objects in ethnographic museum formats of display, he demonstrated that the content of the material could not be communicated. The ethnographic museum, Clair contended, could successfully frame factual material as a means to convey ethnographic knowledge, but when Boltanski’s personal material was presented in the same format, it was empty of meaning: ‘as if at the threshold of knowledge, it affirms only the desire for that knowledge: the hollow form of a lure.’17 Although Clair briefly acknowledged the challenges that museum structures posed to communicating the meaning of Boltanski’s materials, his essay did not develop the implications of this challenge. In the context of the exhibition for the national museum, the project of revalidating the museum took precedence, and Clair focused his attention more strongly on the elements of Boltanski’s work that seemed to offer a new hope for the museum.18

Yet Boltanski’s work presents a serious challenge to the notion that the museum can preserve and convey to its audience the personal memories

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18. Céline Gillet Lascout, who wrote for Clair at the *Chroniques de l’art vivant*, took up a similar line of argument, stating that Boltanski’s collections of used clothing, gestures, and rituals illustrated that ‘C. Boltanski is incomunicable.’ When organizing an exhibition for a state museum several months later, however, he likewise contradicted his earlier argument and asserted that Boltanski’s ‘personal museum’ constituted a collective representation. See Gilbert Lascout, ‘Éloge de l’accumulation et du bric-à-brac’, *L’Art vivant*, no. 35, December 1972-January 1973, p. 17.
associated with his images. His booklet *Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood*, for example, provides an exaggerated account of chasing the past, trying to piece it together and secure it, and parodies archival and ethnographic museum methods of conservation. The cover of the booklet reproduces a school photograph with an ‘x’ marked above Boltanski’s head, indicating him in the photograph (Fig. 3). The second page contains a statement explaining that his project – an attempt to conserve the first six years of his life in their entirety – was a struggle against death, an effort at collective survival. He states: ‘Only with great difficulty did I find the elements presented here. Proving their authenticity, situating them exactly, was only possible by incessant questions and a meticulous investigation.’ He concludes by asking: ‘How many years will be occupied with searching, studying, and classifying before my life will be secured, neatly arranged and labelled in a safe place, sheltered from theft, fire, and atomic war, before it will be possible to take it out and reconstitute my life at any moment and before I, being assured of not dying, can finally rest?’

The rest of the booklet illustrated his personal belongings in the photographs, with labels such as ‘Christian Boltanski playing with blocks in 1946’, ‘Christian Boltanski’s blocks found again in 1969’, ‘Boltanski’s bed from 1947 to 1950’, his ‘shirt in March 1949’, ‘a piece of a sweater worn by him in 1949’, and ‘tufts of his hair from 1949’ (Figs. 4 and 5).

Boltanski’s booklet suggests an ethnography of an individual in French society, yet simultaneously frustrates the process of finding the personal meaning of the material, because of the work’s strict adherence to the kinds of framing devices common in museum presentation. In an ethnographic museum, such as the Musée de l’homme in the early 1970s, unlike in an art museum, utilitarian objects and photographs were understood as evidence and as providing an authentic picture of the past. Objects and illustrations were accompanied by textual explanations so that they could be appreciated as exemplary of the culture. But when Boltanski presented his personal material

19. ‘Ce n’est qu’avec une peine infinie qui j’ai pu retrouver les quelques elements qui je présente ici. Prouver leur authenticité, les situer exactement, tout cela n’a été possible que par des questions incessantes et une enquête minutieuse.’

20. ‘Combien se passera-t-il d’années, occupé à chercher, à étudier, à classer, avant que ma vie soit en sécurité, soigneusement rangée et étiquetée dans un lieu sûr, à l’abri du vol, de l’incendie et de la guerre atomique, d’où il soit possible de la sortir et la reconstituer à tout moment, et que, étant alors assuré de ne pas mourir, je puisse, enfin, me reposer?’

as ethnographic documents, his childhood stories were hardly communicated. His presentation of the photograph of the bed or of the piece of the sweater as ‘evidence’ seems absurd. What does the picture of the bed tell us beyond the fact that the object existed? The process of proving the authenticity of his objects, such as his childhood sweater and blocks, is represented with great hyperbole; such objects are given dates with the precision usually reserved for historical events, yet their quotidian nature suggests that their use would have been ordinary and ongoing, and thus more difficult to date in this way.

Because Boltanski presents his personal objects in this impersonal, ethnographic format, it is difficult to create a picture of the individual who owned them. Part of the difficulty stems from the fact that in viewing ethnographic displays we do not look for depictions of individuals but for exemplary representations of a culture. In order to access the private meaning of the objects, we would require biographical information gained either from personal familiarity or from knowledge of the career of an individual. Because such information about Boltanski’s biography is not provided, the personal memories associated with his objects cannot be communicated in their given format. His exaggerated account of storing and labelling objects underscores
the implausibility of the idea that one could simply fix pure moments and later re-experience them, even as it put forth an impassioned plea to do so. By presenting documents of his personal life within the museum’s formats of preservation, Boltanski explored the limits of preserving personal and collective memory within public museum frameworks, thus questioning the function of the museum as a site of memory and a representation of collective culture.

In the catalogue essay that framed Boltanski’s work in the Expo ’72, Clair posed his work as ethnographic to provide an answer to the problem of the elitism of the museum, but did not discuss the challenges that the work suggested to the possibility for collective representation. Although in his curatorial gestures to the public Clair attempted to respond to contemporary concerns, many artists and critics felt that the Expo ’72 had not achieved the solution to the problem of the museum and boycotted and challenged the exhibition.

The Documenta 5 and Boltanski’s Family Album

Still, Boltanski’s work seemed to hold promise and would continue to play a role in the French art administration’s efforts to promote the relevance of the new museum. The interpretation that would become the most important for Boltanski’s career and for the new museum, was articulated around Boltanski’s Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, one hundred and fifty photographs from an anonymous family’s album, displayed so as to span a museum wall (Figs. 6–10). This work was not shown at the Expo ’72, though it was illustrated in the catalogue, but rather in the concurrent Documenta 5 exhibition in Kassel, Germany; nonetheless, French critics and curators returned to it over the years leading up to the opening of the Pompidou Centre as they put forth their arguments to justify the new museum. Although Boltanski’s photo album employed an ethnographic approach similar to that of his Vitrines and Search for and presentation of everything remaining from my childhood — displaying ordinary images from French culture that represented typical social customs — the ethnographic interpretation advanced at the Expo ’72 was not the interpretation that would prove most compelling to policymakers. When the Photo Album of the Family D. was shown in Paris earlier in 1972, several French critics had seen his ordinary photographs as triggering viewers’

Fig. 6. Christian Boltanski, Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, 1971, 150 silver gelatin photographs, each 20 × 30 cm. Frac Rhône-Alpes; housed at the Musée d’art moderne, Saint-Etienne.
memories and encouraging identification – as, in fact, an instance of the sort of meaning-making encounter between artwork and individual viewer that had been the hoped-for goal articulated by the maison de la culture directors in 1968. It was Documenta 5 that would popularise this interpretation, which cast Boltanski’s art as a powerful solution to the problem of re-imagining the museum. Yet this interpretation also overlooked the way Boltanski’s images frustrated as well as encouraged viewers’ identification.

In the introduction to the Documenta 5 exhibition catalogue, curator Hans Hein Holz argued that photographs of family rituals and events, like those in Boltanski’s Photo Album of the Family D., provided a new language for expressing private experience. In fact, Holz assumed that people’s experiences and photographs were similar enough that they could identify with the depicted activities and project their own experiences into the photos.21 Boltanski’s statement on the Family D. piece, which was reprinted in the Documenta 5 catalogue, seemed to reinforce this idea:

In July of ’71, I asked one of my friends, Michael D. . . . to entrust me with the photo album his parents possessed. I who knew nothing about them, wanted to try to reconstitute their life by using these images which, taken at all the important moments, would remain after their death as proof of their existence. I could discover the order in which the photographs had been taken and the relations that existed between the persons represented in them. But I realised that I could go no further, because these documents belonged to the memories common to any family, that each person could recognise himself in these vacation or birthday photographs. These photographs did not teach me anything about the Family D. . . . , they returned me to my own memories.22

The Family D. album, therefore, appeared to enable the individual viewer to recall personal memories while gesturing toward a collective experience.

Boltanski’s explanations of the way the Family D. photographs worked resembled ideas from Photography: A Middle-Brow Art (1965), a text on which his brother Luc Boltanski collaborated with Pierre Bourdieu, but with the key difference that Christian Boltanski’s approach ignored their primary focus, the role of class difference in photography.23 Christian Boltanski’s statement suggested that the family album was universally accessible to viewers; Bourdieu, in contrast, argued that family photos manifested class rivalry and the struggle for distinction. The ordinary photos of each social class represented its own rituals and values, expressing the aesthetics of what Bourdieu termed the habitus – the values and tastes which had been internalised by the taker as a member of a certain social class. Because photographs captured subjects and behaviours that were socially established, the photography in family albums was stereotyped, showing the same kinds of people, objects, and places; the particular choice of subjects and manner in which they were represented, however, would only seem appropriate to members of the same social class.

Bourdieu further contended that ordinary photography was a private production for private use: it expressed the relationship between the photographer and the object or person photographed and had no intentions of universality. In family photographs, persons were photographed in terms of their roles within the family so that the image signified generational succession and reinforced the group’s sense of unity. The person in the image was thus reduced to a pure sign, and the viewer needed to have enough knowledge of family history to be able to decode it.

Bourdieu described how family albums were used for creating social memory and integrating new members into the family:

22. “En juillet 71, j’ai demandé à un de mes amis, Michel D. . . ., de me confier l’album de photographies que possédaient ses parents. Je voulais, moi qui ne savais rien d’eux, tenter de reconstituer leur vie en me servant de ces images qui, prises à tous les moments importants, resteraient après leur mort comme la pièce à conviction de leur existence. Je pus découvrir l’ordre dans lequel elles avaient été prises et les liens qui existaient entre les personnages qu’elles représentaient. Mais je m’aperçus que je ne pouvais aller plus loin, car ces documents semblaient appartenir aux souvenirs communs de n’importe quelle famille, que chacun pouvait se reconnaître dans ces photos de vacances ou d’anniversaire. Ces photographies ne m’apprienaient rien sur ce qu’avait été réellement la vie de la Famille D. . . ., elles me renvoyaient à mes propres souvenirs.”
There is nothing more unlike the introspective "search for lost time" than those displays of family photographs with their commentaries, the ritual of integration that the family makes its new members undergo. The images . . . evoke and communicate memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group . . . draws confirmation of its present unity through moments of its past; this is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring, and edifying than a family album; all the unique experiences that give the individual memory the particularity of a secret are banished from it, and the common past, or, perhaps, the highest common denominator of the past, has all the clarity of a faithfully visited gravestone. Because while seeming to evoke the past, photography actually exercises it by calling it such, it fulfills the normalising function that society confers on funeral rites, namely at once recalling the memory of the departed and the memory of their passing, recalling that they lived, and that they are dead and buried and that they continue on in the living.24

While Bourdieu argued that family photos were only interesting to viewers who were sufficiently steeped in the family's history to be able to decipher them, Holz implied that the images could speak to any viewer, providing them with a language for making sense of everyday family history. But neither of these views fully encompasses the experience of viewing the Family D. pictures when displayed anonymously on the wall of a museum. Scanning across the rows of images we can discern events, such as a bride and groom at their wedding altar and vacation trips to the beach (Figs. 7 and 8). The majority of the photographs show family members standing in static poses or seated at a table for a meal (Fig. 9). We can see that the characters are smiling and laughing, but do not know why, because we do not know the event the photo was taken to depict and that would give the photograph its meaning. The photographs do not create the familial bonds Bourdieu described because we cannot access the story of the family's history that they represent.

Without the oral history that usually accompanies family photos, the pictures are opaque. The images do not tell about subjects' personal lives, they merely show details: this family visited their grandparents' home and went to the beach for their holidays (Fig. 10). Rather than conveying some kind of personal experience, the images merely provide descriptive information with an aura of truth, creating a feeling of nostalgia which is devoid of direct content. The details of the photographs – activities such as boating trips – as well as the frequency with which the photographs were taken, reveal that the family belonged to the upper-middle class.25 At the same time, however, images were selected with few specifics of time or place and details were cropped out of the pictures, eliminating many of the particularities of this family's history so that it might appear more similar to other families' photographs and encourage viewers' identification. Furthermore, the photographs in the exhibition were not displayed as they would be in a family album, which usually follows a chronology and includes individual labels for the pictures. Here, the uniform size and framing, as well as the absence of captions and jumbled chronology, equalise the significance of each element and draw attention to the way subjects repeat, so that the depicted lives become combinations of ritual events, such as birthdays, vacations, and picnics. We can identify familiar subjects and events, yet we can never recuperate the personal memories that presumably once were associated with the photographs. Although Boltanski's statement on the project was taken to reinforce the idea of universal identification with the photos, I would argue that it also suggests the inevitable limitations on the viewer. As Boltanski put it: 'These photographs did not teach me anything about the Family D. . . . they returned me to my own memories.' Boltanski's statement suggests the way the audience is frustrated by the photographs: we can never inhabit or possess others'

25. Critic Alfred Pacquement noted that the subject matter as well as the framing of the Family D. photographs conveyed that the family's social status was upper-middle class. Alfred Pacquement, 'Christian Boltanski', *Les Lettres françaises*, no. 1418, 12–18 January, p. 26.
memories as represented by the photographs, we can only use them as a point of return to our own past.

The series of photographs was likely to produce conflicting responses. On the one hand, the unfamiliarity of the individuals makes them seem anonymous, distant, even boringly stereotypical and repetitive. On the other, because a visual narration can be traced, with the characters growing up over time, the viewer is likely to experience a strong sense of nostalgia and identification. Photos show two brothers visiting their grandfather and playing on the beach when they are young, returning to their grandfather’s home on

Fig. 7. Christian Boltanski, Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, (detail), 1971, 150 silver gelatin photographs, each 20 × 30 cm. Frac Rhône-Alpes; housed at the Musée d’art moderne, Saint-Etienne.

Fig. 8. Christian Boltanski, Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, (detail), 1971, 150 silver gelatin photographs, each 20 × 30 cm. Frac Rhône-Alpes; housed at the Musée d’art moderne, Saint-Etienne.
vacations, and visiting him again as young men. The viewer may feel mixed emotions about the passage of time when he sees images of people’s lives laid out across a wall, feeling both the happiness of the events and sadness that they are gone. Encountering ritualised occasions that he may expect to experience but that have already passed for this family may suggest to him that in the future his own history might similarly be regarded as a series of frozen moments of inexplicable or lost detail. Because he cannot access the meaning of the photographs he may try to create meanings or to project his own.

In view of this account, the Family D. images point to the limitations of
Bourdieu’s model, for they solicited a cross-class identification that he would have argued against. Although the images did not fulfil the expected function of telling about the family’s history, their very inability to disclose this history could entice viewers of all social strata to project meanings into them, forming sentimental, nostalgic attachments with images of an upper-middle class past. Nostalgia was the medium through which a new national identification could become possible. In the museum, the upper-middle class family history in photographs took on the status of patrimony – and beckoned the viewer to participate in it. Just as for Bourdieu the photos served to integrate individuals into the family when displayed in the home, so they were to integrate citizens into the patrimony when displayed in the museum, offering the viewer, through the process of identifying with them, the opportunity to be brought into the national family. The viewer of the Family D. photos was thus encouraged to orient his personal history through the terms of the one he saw, projecting his memories into the photos and desiring a past like this, thereby making an ambiguous upper-middle class a new point of identification for nationhood. His identification with the photos, however, was not necessarily based on what they represented or on his actual commonality of experience, but largely depended upon an imaginary projection into the photographs, facilitated by the exemplary status accorded to the work by its representation within a museum. This process of identification was thus a far cry from curators’ avowed intentions of democratising the museum by including a wide range of personal experience. Instead, viewers were encouraged to imagine their past in terms of one particular history, flattening out the specificity of their personal memories. As curators praised the Family D. photographs, however, they overlooked the tenuousness of viewers’ identification and of the supposed collectivity the images represented.

This idea that the photographs enabled universal identification, suggested at Documenta 5, came to be heavily promoted in France at a time when the function of the museum was being vigorously debated, due to the controversy surrounding the Expo ’72 and plans for the permanent museum in the Pompidou Centre. Although Boltanski had not participated in the museum protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, his work engages the issues they raised, and critiques the role of the museum as a reservoir of cultural memory by showing its inability to preserve and communicate private memories. Boltanski’s combinations of everyday forms of documenting memories, such as the family photographs, and museum forms of presentation, illustrate the difficulty of preserving personal memory in public museum frameworks. By limiting the amount of personal information the images conveyed, and thereby permitting only a partial, largely fictional identification on the part of the viewer, Boltanski’s photographs ultimately frustrated the use to which museum curators attempted to put them.

The universal meaning that Boltanski’s work seemed to afford, however, when it was promoted by curators in France, allowed the state-sponsored museum both to incorporate and diffuse activists’ demands for an inclusive, accessible form of art that would reach out to new audiences. The curators’ interpretation of the Family D. album – ordinary images in which viewers could see their own lives reflected – seemed to realise the aims of those who saw art that emerged from popular practices as the form that spoke most directly to the people. Yet while the curators’ interpretation employed the rhetoric used by advocates of popular culture, it did not address their primary objectives. For advocates of populist art, from the directors of the maisons de la culture to outsider activists, the art of the everyday was to represent new
constituencies, especially members of the working class, making them more cognisant of and instrumental in improving their social situation. Rather than emphasising the social specificity called for by the leftist advocates of popular culture, however, the interpretation of Boltanski’s work advanced by museum curators reinforced a more socially stable notion of national culture favoured by the rightist government; their idea that the work represented the collective claimed a broad audience and implied that the work was a representation of national identity. The curators’ interpretation downplayed the class specificity depicted in Boltanski’s photographs and conceived of the viewer’s process of identification as an apolitical negotiation of a classless individual within the national collective. Furthermore, the argument that the meaning of the work remained in the familial sphere – that the work triggered the viewer’s memories of his own past and that he had thus an individual and unique response – could make the work appear to be outside politics, ideology, or class struggle. Whereas in 1968, revolutionaries widely rejected the museum as patrimony and as the preservation of a history that was the domain of the elite, now, in 1972, Boltanski’s *Family D.* photos were imagined by museum curators to take the place of elitist history, with photographs of everyday life replacing the fine-art objects that Malraux had once sought to democratise through photography. Because Boltanski’s *Family D.* album seemed to respond to the democratising aims of ’68 and simultaneously reinforced state cultural goals, it appeared the ideal piece of artwork for the organisers of the new museum who promoted this interpretation as the plans for the Pompidou Centre were enacted.

Due to the apparent flexibility of this interpretation of Boltanski’s *Family D.* album, the interpretation has remained dominant to this day. In 1976, one year before the Centre officially opened, a travelling exhibition of Boltanski’s work was sponsored by the museum’s administration. In a highly publicised interview, Boltanski took up the rhetoric that had made the *Photo Album of the Family D.* famous, and linked it to his ongoing photographic projects:

> I never tried to speak about myself, or to tell about my own memories of childhood. I always wanted to tell stories that are common to all. When I exhibited a photographic album, I realised that in fact we all have the same photographs, that these albums were catalogues of family rituals, such as marriage, vacation, first communion, and their function was to reinforce family cohesion. The spectators recognised themselves in these photographs, saying “I was at that beach;” or “that looks like my uncle;” or “me too, I had a white suit when I was young.” [. . .]
>
> Everyone has made a photograph or could make one, it is a media that is known and accessible to all.26

Thus the state art administration and Boltanski himself continued to promote the themes originating in the summer of 1972: the family album was the basis for a new, broadly accessible and democratic point of national identity. Boltanski’s images, however, continued to work against the statements he used to frame them.27 The alternative interpretations that may be taken from these pieces – the ethnographic elements highlighted by the Expo ’72 and the critique of the museum that the work also suggested – all this was soon to be lost from view as the museum’s interpretation gained prominence.

Boltanski’s work has remained important over the last three decades, especially in moments when minority groups have posed challenges to ideas of national culture and museums have tried to respond to pressures for inclusiveness. His work has come to be seen in Europe and North America as allowing easy identification and opening space in the museum for previously unrepresented histories.28 This essay has demonstrated how this interpretation
of Boltanski’s work originated in 1972 and was used to promote the new national museum of modern art as an answer to the 1968 demands for representative, inclusive museums. Yet this interpretation also lost sight of the work’s challenges to the museum. After all, Boltanski’s work makes visible social differences as well as the gaps between personal memory and that which can be communicated to the collective audiences of the museum. Though his memory images have come to be seen as the means for transforming the museum into a truly democratic representation grounded in identification and personal memory, they resist this interpretation as strongly as they invite it, raising the question of whether the museum could ever fully represent democratic inclusiveness, and whether individual memory and identification could be the grounds to achieve it.

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