

Christian Boltanski
“Après” at MAC/VAL
From January 15 to March 28, 2010

Interview between Christian Boltanski and Alexia Fabre,
Tuesday, July 21 2009

An exhibition in two acts

C.B.: The exhibition at MAC/VAL is closely related to the one in the Grand Palais. It's a two-part work. The Grand Palais exhibition is entitled **“Personnes”** and addresses the idea of death and the choice of God; the MAC/VAL exhibition, **“Après”**, takes place in an afterlife where pain has been alleviated. The work taken as a whole is a reference to Dante's *Inferno*.

It's important for me that the viewer be inside the artwork rather than standing in front of it. Visual art is spatial, whereas theater is temporal. I tried to combine space and time in this project to create a kind of progression.

I chose the Grand Palais in winter deliberately. It will be cold and the cold will be an integral part of the work.

Labyrinth

C.B.: The visitors at MAC/VAL wander their way through a labyrinth. It's a journey in which encounters are always possible.

Death

C.B.: It's not like at the Grand Palais, where the spectator ambles through a universe of sound and fury, where the crane represents the hand of fate by picking up and dropping garments. At the MAC/VAL exhibition, everything is quiet and warm, and only the characters (half marionettes, half angels) repeat the final questions.

I don't think there is anything after “after”. The only thing I believe in is that we are made up of a puzzle of deaths. Our faces are made up of thousands of small pieces, as are our souls. It's these thousands of things that make each person unique.

Our relationship to art

C.B.: You could divide artists into two families: those that question art and its forms, and those who ask the existential questions. Of course, the two can be mixed. Monet mostly questions art, while Manet questions life. This is of course an oversimplification, because they both belong to both categories.

There is neither progress nor change in art. We keep asking the same questions, it's just that we use the words of our time.

Painting is naturally still a valid form of expression.

Painting is not dead and will never die, fortunately. But other forms of expression have joined it. Painting feeds on surrounding artforms. It digests music, literature, cinema, and theater. What I'm particularly interested in are the artists who work the borderlines.

Art as parable

Nowadays, I try to ask questions and create emotions through parables. The form follows the type of story I wish to tell. For example, in Japan, I'm creating a library that will contain thousands of human heartbeats. For two years now, I've been setting up recording booths in a number of cities and have already collected more than fifteen thousand heartbeats. Soon people will be able to go to Ejima Island and ask to hear the heartbeat of a loved one. In several years' time, most of the recorded hearts will be the hearts of dead people. Their beats will go on, signifying their presence but also announcing their absence.

Until my death, I will broadcast live images of my atelier into a cave in Tasmania. Again, the images are designed to preserve over time the image of my absence. A major part of my work has been to struggle against death by stopping time.

From the very start, it was obvious that it's a hopeless fight, doomed to failure.

Chance

C.B.: I've always been interested in chance. Hence the piece in Berlin, called *The Missing House*. Why did a bomb fall on building B and all its occupants die, while buildings B and C emerged unscathed? The older you get, the more you feel that life is like a minefield. Your friends are felled as you go on.

The work at the Grand Palais and the project in Tasmania refer to this questioning caused by chance, the hand of God. At MAC/VAL, the spectator's path and the encounters with the strange "questioners" occur at random.

Transmission

C.B.: I see my artworks as musical scores performed by myself. Everything that will be presented at the Grand Palais and at MAC/VAL will be recycled. The pieces may be exhibited elsewhere and will be both similar and different. I see two types of transmission: one is Western, exemplified by the relic, and another – such as in Japan where the oldest temples are rebuilt every ten years – whereby what's important is not the object itself but the fact that humans can recreate it.

I've been interested in relics for a long time, but I'm aware that all relics are false. I'm a liar, and I find lies interesting. For example, in my work *Les Suissesmorts* (*The dead Swiss*), there is always a portrait of a person who is alive and kicking. All it will take is a few years for the lie to become truth. What is currently untrue will become true in the future!

Storytelling

C.B.: My job is to tell the little stories that make everyone stop and think. Instead of using words, I use visual and sound media as parables. Everything I do hinges on the idea of querying, but doesn't always constitute a formal question. I try to provoke emotion, but art is also artifice. I'm not here to tell the truth, but rather to have a maximum number of people feel the truth.