

Installation | As Christian Boltanski unveils a giant, inventive work in Scotland, Jane Ure-Smith talks to him about art and death

As I take a seat in his Paris studio, Christian Boltanski points to a camera and warns me that we are being watched. I'm now part of the Australian art collector David Walsh's project to record Boltanski's working life for posterity. For the past six years, visitors to Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania have been able to enter a small pavilion and watch a live feed of the artist in his studio. Walsh, a professional gambler, has agreed to pay the artist a monthly fee for as long as he lives.

"I was to die within one year — that's what he told me, when I sold him this piece," Boltanski explains, hooting with laughter. "In one year, he was to pay me the money I asked for the work. If I died that day, he made a good bargain. If I died in two years, he lost money!"

Matters of life and death have absorbed Boltanski, now 71, for his entire artistic career: why do some survive when others perish? What's the role of chance in our lives? His starting point is a frank acceptance of death. "To die is normal," he says. "I love life, but there is no reason to hide the truth: you look at a baby and you know it is going to die."

But can we really remember the dead? Boltanski creates memorials in the form of archives of names, faces and, most recently, heartbeats. Since 2008, visitors to his exhibitions have been invited to record their heartbeat and some 60,000 of them are now stored on a tiny Japanese island called Teshima. At "Les Archives du Coeur" visitors can ask to hear the heartbeats of their dead grandparents, tap into the collection generally or add their own heartbeat to it.

Yet Walsh's attempt to preserve the artist's life beyond the grave is fundamentally flawed, Boltanski believes. "From the beginning, I wanted to fight against dying and disappearing, but it's just not possible," he says. "The man in Tasmania can have 1,000 hours of my life, but when I am dead he has nothing — because he doesn't have my thought."

The heartbeats are just as insubstantial. All you can do is "preserve a presence that speaks about an absence", says Boltanski. So he does that. One such work will be unveiled this weekend at Jupiter Artland, near Edinburgh. The artist's first permanent outdoor work in the UK, "Animitas" is a field of Japanese bells on long stalks that "sing" in the breeze. The metal stems, planted on an island in Jupiter's duck pond, map the position of the stars on the night in 1944 when the artist was born.

Inspired by makeshift roadside shrines, the artist initially made the piece in 2014 in the remote high desert of northern Chile to coincide with a retrospective of his work at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, in Santiago.



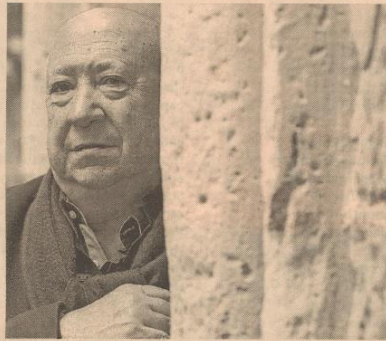
Heartbeats in the breeze

Visitors to the museum could watch the bells via a live webcam feed.

"What was beautiful for me was that you are sitting in a big city, but you can feel the wind of the desert, the light and the sun," says Boltanski, a confirmed urbanite. At Jupiter, his aim was to disturb the setting as little as possible. "I try to make work outside very modest," he

Above: Christian Boltanski's 'Animitas' (2014) in the Chilean desert

Below: the artist
Christian Boltanski, Kewenig



says. "It's possible in this garden to imagine the piece is not an art piece."

There's a poetry and lightness to this recent work. At Spain's Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, an exhibition of work from the 1990s shows a darker side. His "Dead Swiss", a series built from stacks of biscuit tins, each bearing an image of a dead person, takes centre stage. In one room, the stacks rise up like precarious tower blocks. "For me this is an image of life: we look strong but perhaps in 10 minutes we will die." In a second room, the tins form a vault, and the viewer is invited to step gingerly inside.

Boltanski's Swiss all came from the same valley near Geneva, where the local paper ran a picture of every person who died. "I chose the Swiss because they have no reason to die," he explains. "They are rich, the air is good, they have had no war for 200 years. Yet they die."

His dead Swiss are Everyman figures: in their tiny smiling faces we can see our own fate. But they are more than that. They are one of the ways that the artist, born in occupied Paris in 1944 to a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, has found to talk about the Holocaust. "If I

were a psychoanalyst," he says, "the sounds of the words 'Jewish' and 'Swiss' are not so different." He says it in English, but the French words *juif* and *Suisse* are even closer.

"At the beginning of the life of an artist there is always a trauma," he continues. "I believe that mine was that when I was two or three years old, all the friends of

'In the life of an artist there is always a trauma. All the friends of my parents were survivors of the Shoah'

my parents were survivors of the Shoah. The family was destroyed by that. I love people, but I know now that everybody can kill. Tomorrow the nice neighbour can kill the Muslim next door."

But what troubles Boltanski and motivates much of his work is that those who died in the Holocaust vanished with nothing to mark their deaths. "It is worse to destroy the identity of a person than to kill a person," he says.

The day before we met, Boltanski had returned from Japan, where he had been installing a second work on Teshima. Like "Animitas", the piece uses bells: visitors can buy one and add it to the work as a memorial to a loved one, living or dead. It is a place of pilgrimage, but like the original "Animitas" in the Chilean desert, you don't need to go there. Boltanski is happy if you simply know it exists.

One possibility of immortality, he's beginning to think, lies not in objects such as David Walsh's video, but in ideas that can be passed on and "played", like a piece of music, by different people. The Musée des Arts Contemporains in Mons, Belgium, for example, has just bought his "Les Registres du Grand-Hornu", an installation that no longer exists in physical form.

"I hope that one day when I am dead they are going to make a work of Boltanski — played by Mr X," he says, with obvious pleasure.

jupiterartland.org
Christian Boltanski, *Départ-Arrivée*, IVAM, to November 6. ivam.es