

John Baldessari artist project

Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art

Christian Boltanski

James Turrell

Clement Meadmore

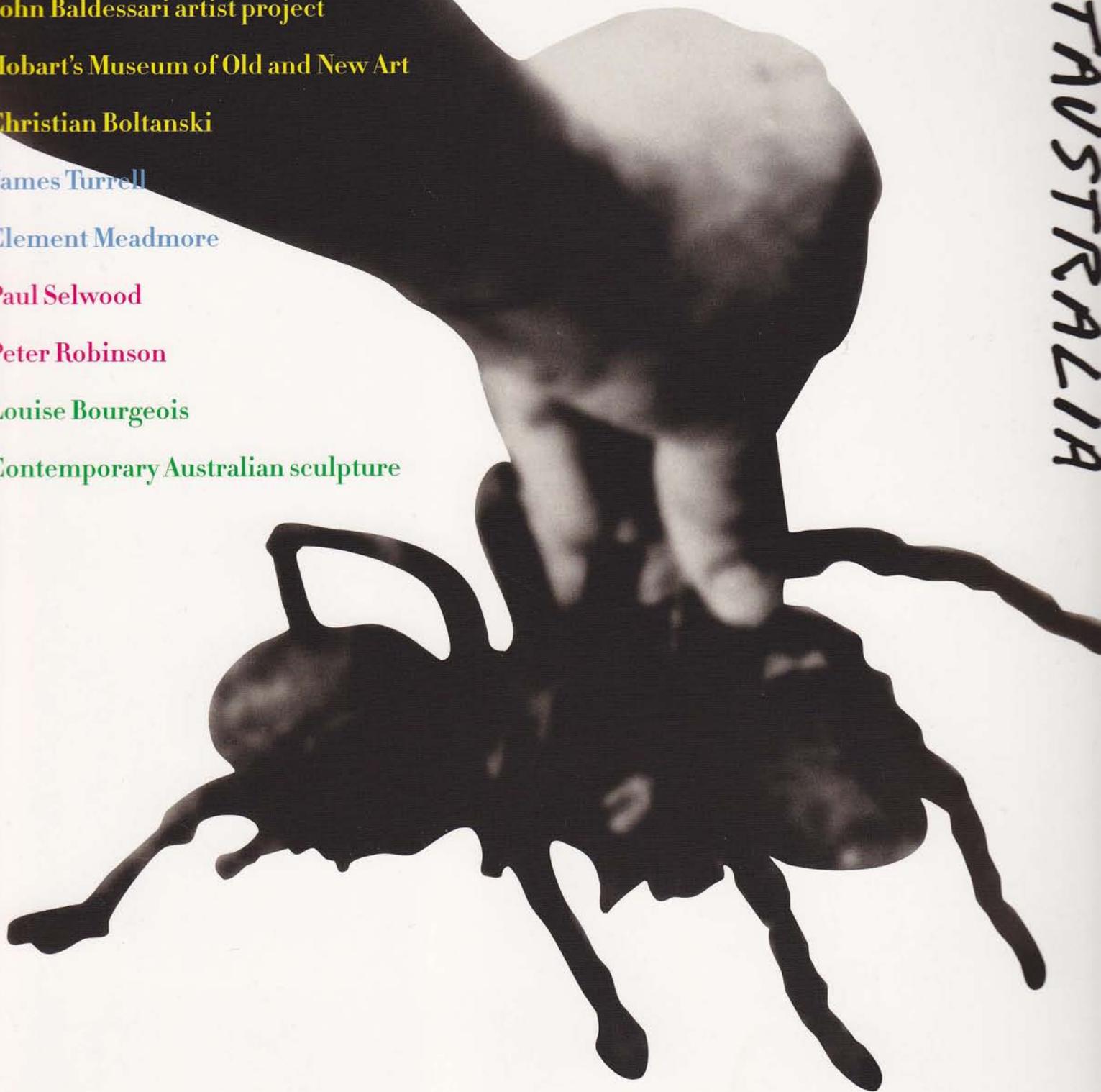
Paul Selwood

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ART AUSTRALIA



From Malakoff to Moorilla: *Christian Boltanski in conversation* with Caroline Hancock

BORN IN 1944, CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI is one of the most renowned living French artists. He will be representing France at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. During 2010 he held two major shows in Paris: 'Personnes' (French for 'People' or 'Nobodies'), a large-scale installation for Monumenta, now a yearly event in the great hall of the Grand Palais; and a solo show at the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne called 'Après' ('After'). 'Personnes' was signified by dozens of tonnes of clothes amassed and lined up in an industrial cemetery-like mise en scène, awaiting the hand of God/cherry picker in a (literally) chillingly cold environment to the sound of heartbeats. This spectacular multilayered pondering on the human condition, on life and death, is characteristic of Boltanski's art and interests.

Boltanski's creation, accumulation and revelation of his own personal mythology takes one giant step further as the cave/bunker where his life can now be watched twenty-four hours a day will open to the public in the grounds of the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) at Moorilla from late January 2011. The owner, gambler and collector David Walsh, has placed a bet on Boltanski's life expectancy and they are now bound by contract to a short- or long-term artwork (depending on destiny or chance). Until Boltanski's death, four cameras of the highest possible quality have been installed in his studio in Malakoff in southern Paris; the images are transmitted to the Tasmanian cave and the footage is permanently recorded, day and night, whether the artist is present or not. The installation in the cave itself has been designed by Boltanski to store the DVDs and enable real-time viewing of three monitors screening the studio in France, plus three monitors screening the footage recorded twelve hours previously. With *La vie de C. B.* ('The life of C. B.'), 2010-, Boltanski continues to toy with and risk his real and possible lives. He raises the ante and places his own ethical questions in the public eye right up until his end point.

Christian Boltanski: You are being filmed right now, you know.

Caroline Hancock: Hmm ... How did you meet David Walsh?

CB: He came to Paris and we had a meal together. I was completely fascinated by his relation to chance. He told me that he has really never lost in his life. Only the devil has such power. So I decided to work with him. There is the story of the Tasmanian devil. I was hooked to this game and he was too.

He is fascinated by death, so immediately I thought of my constant quest to preserve traces of my existence. This is a really old idea of mine – already in 1969 the first text I wrote was about wanting to put my life in a box.¹ This project is along the same lines. Of course, as in everything I do, it is bound to fail. One can preserve thousands of images and still not the person. Despite hours and hours of footage, at a certain point I simply won't be around anymore. I am interested in this impossible endeavour.

CH: Can you tell us about the contract?

CB: We decided to work on the basis of this old tradition of a lifetime annuity. To buy *en viager* in France is a transaction by which you pay someone fixed instalments until their death, at which time the payments stop and you inherit the property. David gives me a bit of money each month. In eight years time he will have paid me the agreed amount. If I die in five years time, he gets a good deal. If I die in nine years time, he will pay more. He assures me that since he has never lost a wager, I am bound to die in the next eight years. And it is really likely after all ... he has a very high probability of winning. But I really want to live. And I want to win. So it is a real game. Am I stronger than this man who has made a bet on my destiny? I must try at the very least to live another eight years and six months. If I live another twenty to twenty-five years, he must continue to pay – he won't quite face bankruptcy but it would be a bit of a strain.

Ultimately he would really like to view my death, live. He says that he is constantly anticipating that moment. He would like to

opposite

Entre temps, 2003

Installation view of 'Les Archives du Coeur', La Maison Rouge, Paris, 2008
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris

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Personnes, 2010

Installation view, Monumenta 2010, Grand Palais, Paris
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris
Photograph Didier Plowy

have my last image.

CH: And you? Would you like to do him that favour?

CB: Naturally. In any case, if I survive a while, I will be filmed getting old, struggling to get up the stairs, becoming a bit senile. That is the whole point of this project. Seeing me in different stages. In our society there is a really bad relationship with death. We refuse the idea of dying or ageing. Death is an embarrassment now. Before, during bereavement, you would wear black in mourning for a while. Now you can't talk about this, it is kept hidden. I really love life. I want to live until I am ninety-eight if possible, or more. Of course I have more chances of dying soon than I did fifteen years ago. I think it is really important not to shy away from that fact and to be able to talk about it. It is about accepting the reality of being human and therefore dying. Death is easier if you accept it. Refusing it implies suffering.

More macabre possibilities were discussed. For instance, David wanted to buy my ashes. But I didn't accept that – I don't want to end up in Tasmania; it rains too much. I keep thinking about those Egyptian mummies in his collection so far from their sunny Mediterranean. He also wanted to get my DNA.

CH: In 2010 you also made a monumental and intangible project on the Japanese island of Teshima, *Les archives du coeur* ('The archives of the heart'). There you have been collecting sound bites of people's heartbeats. Visitors can record, consult and listen. These two projects are rather like pendants: an individual story and a collective one.

CB: What is essential is that it is a reality, that it is actually happening. There is a cave. The webcam is functioning. And at the same time, it is a fiction: 'There is an island in Japan where hearts beat'; 'There is a man's life in a cave in Tasmania'. These are like the beginnings of a book. But it would be too easy if it was just invented make-believe. These things need their reality. I also have a lying temperament. There is a reality and the story. I like

thinking about these faraway projects and creating a sort of mythology around them. I hardly make works that can be hung on walls any more. I am more interested in creating these little anecdotes, stories, moralities, to ask questions. Of course, there are no answers.

I am really interested in the webcam. It is astounding to be able to communicate in real time with people on the other side of the world. The fact that this is happening in Tasmania is essential. I wouldn't have done this if it had been in London or Berlin. I would not want to be embarrassed if and when people who know me see it. This is far enough. Not too many people will see it.

CH: Do you perform in front of the cameras – like for your *Saynètes comiques* ('Comic vignettes') in the 1970s?

CB: Well, not really. The first day I walked around naked to make it worth their while but now I don't really take much notice of them. These are the best cameras in existence. If I am reading a letter, they will be able to see it also. Everything is recorded with this great level of detail.

CH: And are you allowed to self-censor?

CB: No, but the contract is hugely detailed; it took months with an Australian lawyer. Although I could potentially cover up the cameras temporarily, there is no angle that is not visible. But there is no sound. The only interest is to see my decline (*déchéance* in French).

CH: Can this be considered a monument to Boltanski?

CB: Yes, this is my tomb. It is inevitably my last work. In fact David really sees it like this and that is why he wanted my ashes.

CH: That would be rather like an object.

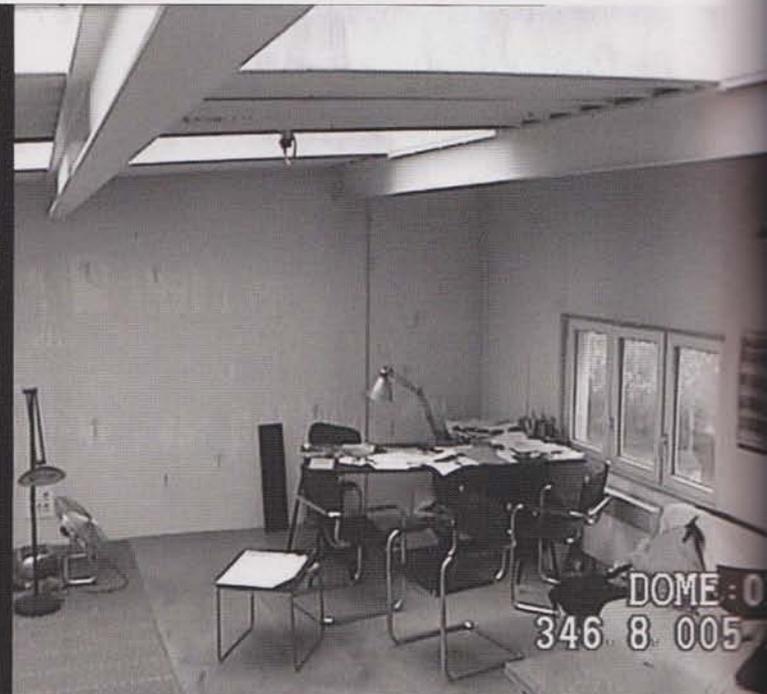
CB: Exactly! We could have made a multiple ... *The authentic ashes* ...

CH: So you are considering the modes in which this project might be made visible. This wasn't in the initial contract?

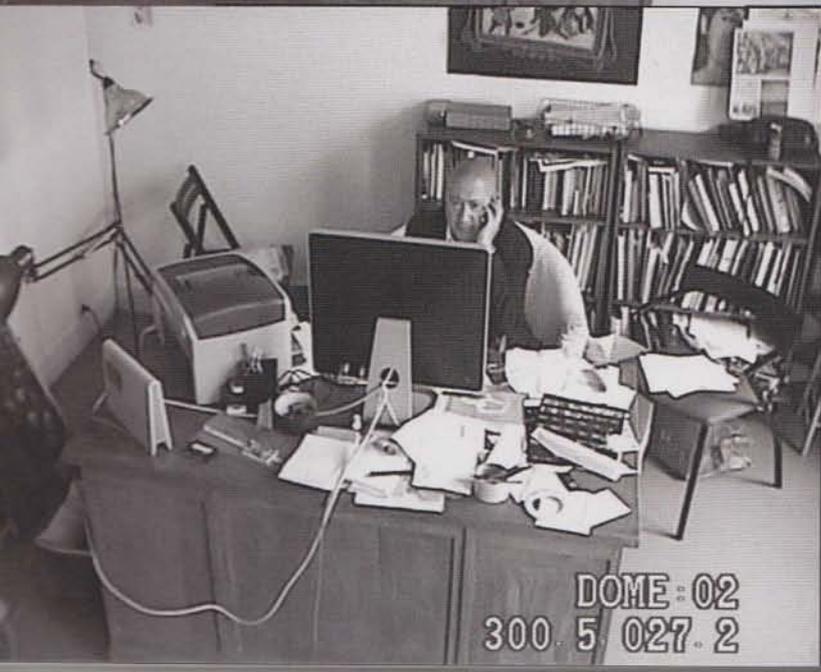
CB: No, it wasn't. The contract establishes that David keeps



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La vie de C. B., 2010

Nine cube monitors showing live feeds, delayed feeds and highlights of Christian Boltanski's studio, dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart. © The artist

everything until I die and that while I live he can't view the past. Once I die, he can do what he likes with it. So at present he can't, for instance, sell sections of it that could appear in Berlin.

What I want to do now is suggest working with the footage – say, 50,000 hours of existing footage on DVD could be made available in the cave at great speed with the possibility to stop the image at any point by chance. You might see someone or no-one. They could condense it into one hour for instance.

CH: Isn't it some sort of stroke of chance to have Walsh appear in your life and enable the realisation of this artwork?

CB: Of course this was a wonderful encounter. I like to talk about my benefactors (in French *bienfaiteurs*) rather than my patrons (*mécènes*). These works are really made *with* someone. The work in Japan would not have happened without the collector suggesting he wanted to do something on this island. I would not have made *Les archives du coeur* without that chance encounter. I seized the chance. I want to make a piece about the Dead Sea, too.

CH: Did reality TV inspire you?

CB: Not so much reality TV because that is all false montage. But there was this amazing website: if you typed 'Rencontres Femmes Asie', there was a site where you saw thousands of women just waving at you, live. The details were extraordinary – like a little glass of water, the morning sun that indicated that that person was really alive but we knew nothing about her. I spent lots of hours looking at this. No information was given. There was no possibility to communicate. It was so full of humanity and yet untouchable. I wanted to do a piece with that but I never managed and then it disappeared. There were so many ladies that I never managed to see them all. That was so touching. It was inexhaustible. This really influenced me.

CH: What are your plans for Venice in June?

CB: I wanted to do something lighter after the Grand Palais project. That was a winter piece; this is a summer piece with no

artificial light. The whole project is based on chance, with a casino feel, money machines and metallic tower structures. I want to base it on the laws of probability. We are going to consult David about this.

It will be possible to win an artwork. Thirty facial portraits will be split into three parts (eyes, nose and mouth) to create thousands of possibilities. There will be a chance out of who knows how many (that is what I want David to tell us) to stop the machine on one actual entire portrait and win it.

CH: When did you meet Jean-Hubert Martin, the curator working with you on the Venice project?

CB: We met at the age of twenty-three, twenty-four. Then he was the only curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris who was interested in the art of his time. We did a film together on Brancusi which is mostly destroyed now. He was really close to artists. He has a special kind of openness and a very bizarre way of thinking, not classical at all. He is a friend and we have great fun together. Venice will be a great journey.

CH: In *La Vie Possible de Christian Boltanski*, your recent book with Catherine Grenier,² you end by saying that you would like to finish your career with a laugh.

CB: Yes – I think it is great to finish with something joyful. A marvellous example at the moment is Alain Resnais, for instance, who is making splendid and serious work in the form of comedies. I would prefer to finish like him rather than like Jean-Luc Godard as an old moraliser, who knows everything and is angry with life. But, of course, you never know for sure which is going to be your last work.

1 Christian Boltanski, *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944-1950*, artist's book, 1969.

2 Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *La Vie Possible de Christian Boltanski*, Fiction & Cie, Seuil, Paris, 2010.