

The Archive of the Grandparents in Backstage

Laura López Paniagua, 2017

The installation “The Archive of the Grandparents” is the result of a collaborative, site-specific project developed by artist Christian Boltanski and the students of Leuphana Universität that finished in 1996. The archive on view literally contains the mementos of the grandparents of students of that generation. This work is Part III of the exhibition “Backstage”, 2017. The pertinence of such artwork in the framework of an otherwise straightforward history exhibition can be explained in at least two different ways, depending on the interpretation given to “The Archive of the Grandparents”. If the installation is considered a postmodern archival work, in line with the characteristics of Boltanski’s oeuvre in general, it becomes a metaphorical fugue point of the overarching exhibition “Backstage”, as it questions the very principles upon which scholarly historical investigation is built (namely, the document and the archive). If, on the other hand, it is considered as an archive in the traditional sense, it becomes illustrative of the sociological notion of “backstage” as developed by Erving Goffman, and which inspires the title of the exhibition.

Generational Parallax

Germany, a democratic country and leading in the cultural and artistic sphere in Europe, fell into the barbarism of the Nazi regime. Your grandparents were witnesses or contributors to this development. In their majority they were normal, good, intelligent and responsible people, just like you and us. How did they experience these convulsions, how did they accept them? I would like you to pursue these questions by asking your relatives the same questions, researching, collecting letters, photos and objects. For me, this should not be approached as a historical or sociological work, but rather as an individual inquiry, a work of the "small memory" of each person, they should be investigations directed at ourselves: how would you react, how would I react? Because what happened could happen again in Germany, in France or somewhere else, and then we would be witnesses or contributors.¹

With this open call, sent out more than twenty years ago, in 1994, artist Christian Boltanski (Paris, 1944) invited the students of Lüneburg University to collaborate in this research project, to be held for one and a half years at the premises of the institution. During this period, the artist and the students met regularly to discuss their findings and the direction that the project should take, as in the beginning, the outcome of the undertaking had not been yet defined. The piece on view on the occasion of the exhibition “Backstage”, 2017, was one of its products: the part of the project that was signed by Boltanski under the title “The Archive of the Grandparents”. The installation consists of a room in the cellar of building 7 of the university, in which two metal shelves stand, containing twenty cardboard boxes with the belongings of the grandparents of the students that participated. An amateur super 8 film with footage from the 1940s, provided by one of them², is projected on the arrangement. The first opening of this space took place on April 27, 1996, but that time, the contiguous chamber was also accessible and considered as part of the

¹ Christian Boltanski’s open call to the students of Leuphana Universität, 1994. This information was found in a student paper written by one of the participants of the project: Märkel, Gesine. 1999. “Das Archiv als Kunstwerk - Zum Verhältnis von Dekontextualisierung und Kontextrepräsentation”, Hausarbeit zum Seminar „Das Archiv: Zu Perspektiven eines kulturellen Praxisfelds im ausgehenden 20. Jahrhundert“.

² The film belongs to the private collection of former student Saskia Drechsel’s family.

project. In recent interviews³ with some of the original participants (at the time, students)⁴ the existence of this room has been described as a half-way solution to a discrepancy that arose between the artist and the students as the sessions progressed.

The conflict was a consequence of the volatile subject matter at the heart of the project. The grandparents of the students of that generation lived through the Third Reich, and, as Boltanski had suggested, were its witnesses, its contributors, and in some other cases, its victims. However, despite their first-hand experience (or precisely because of it), and as was habitual in Germany at that time, the grandparents hardly ever addressed what had happened during that time. Boltanski's project provided an artistic and educational framework that allowed these students to ask questions that the tacit silence around this period within the families had always prevented. Consequently, the emotional impact that the findings of the research had on them was immense. Some discovered the Roma origins of their families. Others were confronted with the fact that their relatives were convinced National Socialists, and with their direct implication as authorities in the Regime. The project not only propitiated the breaking of the students' familial taboo. It positioned them in the middle of Germany's most significant socio-historical problem in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II: how and what to remember. Silence within the families was undoubtedly a symptom of these unresolved questions and their implications. Dealing with such a charged material, it is understandable that the dynamics between Boltanski, the students, and the curator of the project, Hans Ulrich Obrist, could lead to heated discussions and clashes.

On his 2002 book "Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance", Harald Welzer approached how the history of the Third Reich was being transmitted within families. The book was based on the study: "Transmitting Historical Awareness," in which Welzer and his colleagues developed a set of comparative interviews and group discussions with members of three generations: eyewitnesses, their children and their grandchildren. Though this project was developed in the framework of another discipline and it applied a different methodology, it practically coincided in time and thematic background with "The Archive of the Grandparents". Welzer points out that the education received by German students regarding these topics was very successful, as throughout their formative years they were exposed to a thorough information base of facts in history lessons and visits to memorial sites. These educational practices also provided the students with a clear moral judgment about National Socialism. However, what the study brought to light was the important dissonance between the official and the private cultures of remembrance in Germany at that time.

(The study) documents a clear tendency on the part of grandchildren to rewrite their grandparents' histories into tales of anti-Nazi heroism and resistance. The pilot study on history teaching by Radtke et al. (2002) suggests that students

³ These interviews were developed in the framework of the seminar "Die Illusion des Gedächtnisses", WS 2016-2017, conducted by Ulf Wuggenig and Laura López Paniagua.

⁴ Former students Gesine Märkel, Saskia Drechsel, Jens Kraemer, Karin Rebbert.

learn one primary thing in classes on the Third Reich: how to talk in a politically correct way about the problematic past.⁵

While transmission of family narratives was proving to be problematic and distorted, the public debate in Germany had been focused since the mid 1980s in the country's recent past and its importance for its political redefinition after reunification. A clear example of the interest in confronting the history of this period head-on were the exhibitions about the war crimes of the Wehrmacht⁶, the first of which opened during the course of Boltanski's project in the nearby city of Hamburg, roughly fifty kilometres away from Leuphana Universität. As the first public events dealing with National Socialism, these shows were highly controversial (the exhibition venue at Saarbrücken was even the target of a bomb attack perpetrated by right-wing extremists). The public process was, thus, complex and challenging, yet the personal family history or, in Boltanski's words, the "small memory" (as opposed to the grand accounts of history), was more nuanced and developing at another pace.

Marianne Hirsch termed as "postmemory" the memory experience of the children and grandchildren of the generation that suffered traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, who grow up dominated by the narratives of a time that preceded their birth⁷. Those memories are wilfully kept alive especially through familial and community remembrance, as sometimes, they are the only remainder of a world that was exterminated. Given that absence, postmemory is by definition mediated through "imaginative investment and creation"⁸. Bearing this concept in mind, how should the memory experience of the children and grandchildren of the Germans who lived the Third Reich be termed? The traces of that world have not disappeared (Parts I and II of the "Backstage" exhibition, 2017, bear witness to this fact). The generation at stake in this case undoubtedly included victims, but its majority was unavoidably composed of active or passive members of the Nazi regime. And very significantly, and in total contrast to postmemory cultures, there was no oral transmission or ritualized activities meant to preserve and commemorate the "small" histories: silence was predominant in families, a fact stressed by the students of Leuphana, and also by Harald Welzer⁹ in his study. It would be inaccurate to talk about historical amnesia, as the offspring of this generation was well informed about history. Perhaps an adequate description would be "generational parallax". "Parallax" is a term used in astronomy and optics to refer to the variation of the position of a certain object depending on the viewpoint from which it is observed. In the

⁵ Welzer, Harald 2002. *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance*. New York: Academic Press. New York: American Jewish Committee. Welzer, Harald 2002. *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, p 2.

⁶ *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (1995), which travelled to 33 German and Austrian cities. The exhibitions were produced by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung. The exhibition was revised and reopened in 2001 under the title *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944*. Since 2004, it has moved permanently to the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin.

⁷ Hirsch, Marianne 1996. Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile. *Poetics Today* Vol 17, no. 4, Creativity and Exile: European / American Perspectives II (Winter 1996).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 662.

⁹ Welzer, Harald 2002, p. 25.

present constellation, this term would designate the alteration in the perception of the relative in question caused by the familial bond, under these specific circumstances (his or her possible cooperation in or tolerance of the atrocities of the Third Reich). As shown by Welzer, this bond can lead to clear generational parallax errors, such as the heroization of relatives or blindness towards their anti-semitism or racism. In any case, silence creates the perfect conditions for this effect to occur.

While Welzer's study exposed the effect of generational parallax, the result of Boltanski's artistic research project was much more brutal, as for the students, the parallax would crumble under the evidence of a past which they themselves would be trying to uncover. They were confronted bare with information that could well shake the foundations of their identities, built on biographical narratives that in some cases were clearly misled. The situation was evidently personal and very relevant for the students, and this made the regular meetings unstable. The project itself was in question and had appeared to reach a dead end after more than a year of investigation. It had been organized by the "Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg"¹⁰, an interdisciplinary and experimental artistic platform, that the university had launched shortly before Boltanski was invited along with Hans-Ulrich Obrist as a guest curator, in 1995¹¹. Ulf Wuggenig, its co-founder and current director, insisted at that point on the necessity of bringing the project to a material conclusion rather than letting it be a mere research with no physical trace to represent it. It was collectively decided that the students would have their room, in which the materials gathered from their families would be displayed, and that Boltanski would set up his installation on the contiguous cellar (where it still stands today). This was the express wish of the artist, as he had become increasingly distressed by the project and wanted to draw a distance. The reasons for this will be discussed following.

The failed meta-archive

Hirsch's article mentioned above examines postmemory discourses in the work of several artists, Christian Boltanski among them. For Hirsch, Boltanski's aesthetic is able to convey some of the fundamental emotional hues of Holocaust postmemory, like feelings of ambivalence and absence. Boltanski's work can be said to take place in the half-lit space of memory, and a significant part of it evokes a diffuse recollection of people, masses of people whose almost palpable individuality appears in a state of dissolution. These features, along with the historical moment in which the artist commenced this line of work (in the mid 1980s¹²), and his own background as the son of a Jew, victim of the Nazi persecution, lead many critics and historians to interpret his aesthetic as a representation of the Holocaust. The artist has always denied such direct readings and has only

¹⁰ "Backstage", 2017, is also a project of the Kunstraum of Leuphana University of Lüneburg.

¹¹ The Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg was launched in 1993 (since 2006 Kunstraum of Leuphana Universität Lüneburg) with the institutional critique project „Services“ by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler, in a joint effort between art historian Beatrice von Bismarck, mathematician Diethelm Stoller, and sociologist Ulf Wuggenig. Ulf Wuggenig and Cornelia Kastelan are the organisers of the "Backstage" exhibition, 2017.

¹² The beginning of this kind of work can be located in "Leçon des Ténèbres" ("Lessons of Darkness"). Kunstverein München, Munich, Germany, 1986.

explicitly addressed the topic in a handful of pieces, though it admittedly is the historical backdrop of his work. What has, without doubt, characterized Boltanski's oeuvre has been ambiguity, a soft focus and a lack of clarity regarding his themes, his formal strategies and his intentions. On the one hand, this has allowed him to elude precise historical or ideological categorizations, and to be able to frame his work in a more universal sphere (for instance, to talk about the transience of human life instead of the Holocaust). On the other, and without contradiction, this evasiveness is precisely what makes his work for many people, and regardless of the artist's intentions, the perfect artistic representation of Holocaust postmemory: in a quandary of recollection and loss, of failed recognition, of a kind of self-deceiving acceptance and of the material traces that, without their memory-bearers, are empty, but nevertheless, ghostly, shells.

To set up an installation in the form of an archive in the cellar of a building is a strategy that Boltanski has replicated several times throughout his career. His use of cellars is inspired by the catholic tradition of building cathedrals over catacombs that host religious secrets, relics and remains of ecclesial members, as a mythical symbolic core whose meaning dissolves in the depths of time¹³. An example of this can be found on his 1999 piece "Archive of the German Members of Parliament", that is located in the underground level of the Reichstag building in Berlin. This work is a collection of biscuit tins, each one representing a democratically elected member of the German Parliament since the Weimar Republic, 1919, until 1999, the year when the installation opened. With a considerable polemic¹⁴, an Adolf Hitler box was also included, not to honour his figure, but as a "reminder to take care of our democracy"¹⁵. Another example of the same strategy is the "Réserve du Conservatoire de Musique" ("Reserve of the Music Conservatory"), 1991. Boltanski was invited to build a work for the new music conservatory of Paris, designed by architect Christian de Portzamparc. His idea, in that case, was that the new school should be metaphorically rooted in the traces of its earlier dwellers¹⁶. Hence, he made an archive with the belongings of the prior generations of students, that most probably would have been discarded with the new building without the artist's intervention.

Boltanski had been interested in archives since the beginning of the 1970s, very early in his career. Influenced by his visits to the Parisian Museum of Ethnography, he started to produce his "Vitrines of Reference" (1970), where he would display his own banal childhood belongings (bits of fabric, toys, photos...) as if they were objects worthy of attention, such as those in museums. And, indeed, why should the vestiges of the man in the street be less interesting than those from remote cultures? Yet this was not the most surprising shift that these works were proposing. The really puzzling conceptual twist lay in the fact that those alleged personal remains of his childhood were

¹³ Boltanski, Christian, in Schwerfel, H. P. 2010. *Les vies possibles de Christian Boltanski* (Documentary). Germany/ France. Produced and distributed by Arte TV. min. 27.

¹⁴ The installation was vandalised in 2012: the Adolf Hitler tin was dented, and there was a discussion among the current parliamentarians as to whether he should be represented at all in an artwork commemorating democracy. In Nowakowski, V. G. 2012.

¹⁵ Boltanski, Christian, quoted by Nowakowski, V. G. 2012. *Das Parlament ist doch nicht der Ort, um schöne Blumen zu zeigen*. *Der Tagesspiegel*. 02.01.2012.

¹⁶ Schwerfel, H. P. 2010. min. 28.

not his. Some mementos were, but others belonged to his nephew and others were just randomly found. This deceitful tactic became the main *modus operandi* of his first works. He engaged in several projects intended to reconstruct his childhood, not the one that he lived, but rather, a “normal” one, unlike his. Due to the Nazi occupation of France, Boltanski’s Jewish father lived hidden under the floorboards of their home for a year and a half. The family lived in a permanent state of anxiety that led them to be together continuously, to sleep all together in a room, and to never go out on the street unaccompanied. Besides, the artist’s mother had suffered polio, and her sons were in charge of carrying her, as she was unable to walk. Under those circumstances, being half-Jewish also caused him to feel different and ashamed¹⁷. Boltanski’s childhood was not normal in comparison with his acquaintances (such as his neighbours), who belonged to the French Catholic majority. Art historians such as Catherine Grenier interpret the first part of his career as being characterised by the desire to escape from his own history¹⁸, using art to avoid his identity and to re-create the past.

One of the most representative works of this phase is the artist book “*Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance, 1944-1950*”, (“Research and presentation of all that remains from my childhood, 1944-1950”), 1969. The book features a collection of photographs of objects very much like those of the “*Vitrines of Reference*”: with an aura of privacy and high emotional value, yet deceptive as biographical evidence. This endeavor would find its continuation in “*Les archives de C.B. 1965-1988*”, (“The Archives of C. B. 1965-1988”), 1989, again, a collection of metal boxes containing all sorts of documents, photos, and desultory remains that Boltanski had accumulated through the years in his studio, and many of whose meaning he had forgotten. By that time (twenty years after “*Recherche...*”), his understanding of the archive had expanded, and he had already started to use it in works that went beyond his biographical reconstructions. His exhibition “*Leçon des Ténèbres*” (“Lessons of Darkness”), which opened for the first time in 1986¹⁹, included the installation “*Archive*”, a massive collection of unfocused photographs of children and adolescents dimly lit by candle-like lamps. This work was paired with “*Autel de Lycee Chases*” (“Altar to Chases High School”), altars built around the photos of students of a Jewish school in Vienna in 1931. Around that time, critics started interpreting these accumulations of anonymous faces in reference to the Holocaust²⁰.

Boltanski’s interest in archives was part of a broader phenomenon. In 1969, Michel Foucault published “*The Archeology of Knowledge*”, in which he approached the topic of the archive from a novel point of view. For Foucault, the archive is, in his words, “the general system of the formation

¹⁷ Boltanski, Christian, Grenier, C. 2009. *The possible life of Christian Boltanski*. MFA Publications (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), p. 142.

¹⁸ Grenier, C. 2012. *On Christian Boltanski (Lecture)*. IHME Contemporary Art Festival. Finland, Helsinki. min. 16.

¹⁹ *Leçon des Ténèbres*, Kunstverein München, Munich, Germany, 1986.

²⁰ See, for instance, Smith, R. 1988. Boltanski’s Haunting Fragments of Despair. *The New York Times*, 12.06.1988.

and transformation of statements”²¹. Though this definition is hardly understandable without context, it does account for the complexity of Foucault’s perspective, and it indicates that he does not understand the archive as a static collection of things, but that it rather refers to the conditions of possibility of discourse at a certain time in history. Despite the fact that it is not a formal theory on history *stricto sensu*, this treatise can be considered an approach to the topic of history. Foucault’s understanding of the archive was as influential as Jacques Derrida’s “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”²², published in 1995, at the time when Boltanski and many other artists were already incorporating archives in their works. Derrida develops a psychoanalytic view of the archive, providing revolutionary notions regarding its contingent nature. He points out, for instance, that “the archivization produces as much as it records the event”²³. In his view, archives are not neutral and objective deposits of documents. Their structure determines what can be archived, and this has a direct consequence on how knowledge is shaped. Therefore, the destabilization of the concept of archive simultaneously causes the stirring of the notion of document and of the knowledge that it is able to produce (for instance, historical knowledge).

In his 2004 article “An Archival Impulse”²⁴, Hal Foster explains that, though archives had been extensively utilized by artists during the pre and postwar periods, at that moment (towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s), they were being used in a specific manner, which he explains as follows:

*(...) archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favour the installation format as they do.*²⁵

Foster goes on to analyze how artists Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean and Sam Durant use archival forms to convey those previously invisible or unattended histories. Thus, the conjoined relationship between archive and history appears once again. These artists build alter-archives to mobilize a stagnated idea of history. The re-examination of the notion of history, crucial for Derrida and for Foucault, as has been already hinted, is, of course, central to postmodern thought. Lyotard famously defined the postmodern as “incredulity toward meta-narratives”²⁶, and the historical narrative of progress is precisely at the core of this skepticism. The vision of history as a process of amelioration through Science and Reason is a project of the Enlightenment that collapsed conclusively after the two World Wars of the twentieth century, and especially, after the

²¹ Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books, New York. Trans. Smith, S. Foucault, M. *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, 1969. p. 130.

²² Derrida, J. Prenowitz, E. 1995. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 9-63, The Johns Hopkins University Press. *Mal d'Archive: Une Impression Freudienne*, 1995.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁴ Foster, Hal 2004. *An Archival Impulse*. *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 3-22. Cambridge Mass., The MIT Press.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ Lyotard, F. 1979. Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, in Harrison, C., Wood, P. (eds.) 1999. *Art in Theory, 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishing. (first published in 1992). p. 999.

abysmal crimes of the Holocaust. It is no coincidence that in the aftermath of such upheaval, art and philosophy gradually focus in the dissolution of the certainties at the basis of Western thought during the last centuries, and in the creative generation of other possibilities.

In this context, it can be considered that Boltanski's use of the archive is due to the same *archival impulse* propelling the artists referred to by Foster, that can be framed within the postmodern disbelief in grand narratives, especially that of the progress of history, always legitimized by the archive. In that sense, his work can be understood as being about what happened "after the Holocaust", (a claim that Boltanski often makes), if the artistic inquiry of the archive is considered, as I am suggesting, a response, whether conscious or unconscious, to the historical *Zeitgeist*. His archives can be interpreted as producing a "postmodern" effect, in the sense exposed, as the information they contain and the kind of history that could be retrieved from them would put in question both the archive and history. This becomes especially clear in his biographical archives, such as "Les archives de C.B. 1965-1988", ("The Archives of C. B. 1965-1988"), 1989. This gathering of twenty-three years of documents would be useless in trying to make a regular biographical reconstruction of the artist (it only contains random bills, photographs of forgotten people, etc.). Here, what is at stake is not the idea of history, but its individual parallel: biography. While, for instance, Foucault, points out the naiveté and narcissism of our narratives of history as unitary and continuous, Pierre Bourdieu develops a criticism of the "biographical illusion", the construction of one's own biography in a teleological manner, in consonance with the narrative forms of each time²⁷. Again, Bourdieu's homonymous article was published in 1987, coinciding temporarily with Boltanski's biographical archives. Beside the interpretation of Boltanski's shifting and crafty biographical pieces as a consequence of his childhood trauma, it doesn't seem far fetched to understand his work as influenced by the sociological theory of the time, especially bearing in mind that his brother, Luc Boltanski, is one of France's most notable sociologists²⁸.

However, regarding Foster's definition of archival artists, could it be considered that Boltanski is seeking to retrieve some lost or ignored historical information, as Hirschhorn or Dean? The historians who interpret his work as a representation of the Holocaust most definitely believe he is. For instance, Ernst van Alphen affirms:

(...) Boltanski evokes preposterously the objectifying and killing potential of the archive as exploited by Nazism.²⁹

It is indisputable that Boltanski's work can bring such associations to van Alphen's mind, but except in a few occasions, this does not seem to be the artist's intention. The reference to the Holocaust

²⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre 1986. L'illusion biographique. In: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Vol. 62-63, June 1986. Persée. pp. 69-72.

²⁸ Art historian Catherine Grenier, personal friend of Boltanski and who interviewed him extensively for the book "The possible life of Christian Boltanski", affirms that his brother Luc had a great influence in his work, and gave it "substance". Grenier, C. 2012. min. 14.

²⁹ Alphen, Ernst van. 2009. Visual Archives and the Holocaust: Christian Boltanski, Odessa Hendeles and Peter Forgacs. In A. Van den Braembussche et al. (eds.) *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective* 137, Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009, p. 142.

is explicit in works such as his “Canada”, 1988, an accumulation of clothing whose title refers to the euphemism used by the Nazis to designate the warehouses where they stored the belongings of the Jewish people sent to the gas chambers³⁰. Or in “Monument (Odessa)”, 1991, depicting Jewish students celebrating Purim fest in France in 1939. In any case, such a clear allusion to the genocide very seldom occurs. What is largely documented is Boltanski’s will to distance himself from such concrete interpretations. For instance:

*My work is not about the camps, it is after the camps. The reality of the Occident was changed by the Holocaust. We can no longer see anything without seeing that. But my work is not about the Holocaust, it’s about death in general, about all of our deaths.*³¹

Boltanski has declared time and again that his will is to be “more universal”, to bring the discussion to an openness where everyone can find a point of identification, hence the formal strategies he applies to dissolve accurate identity depictions (for instance, using the methods of re-photographing and blowing up the found photographs he utilises, which have the effect of blurring the faces). This being said, one can argue that Boltanski’s rationalization of his work, his desire to take the discussion to a neutral ground and his rejection to be pinned down as an artist who represents a precise historical period (and whose identity can also be reduced to a fixed set of biographical facts), is a defense mechanism to escape the devastating historical realities of the Holocaust and his personal tragedies. This might be plausible from a psychological perspective. In any case, rigor would oblige to make a clear distinction between what the artist proclaims as his intentions and what interpreters understand.

It is, then, possible to conclude that Boltanski does not produce archives, but rather, meta-archives. His pieces do not intend to gather documents that can be used to create a regular narrative of history, or a biography as it is commonly understood. Their randomness, banality, deceitfulness, and anonymity lead to epistemological questions about the nature of memory, the fictive quality of biography and of history, the contingency of identities in cultural narratives, etcetera. Boltanski’s distress regarding the Kunstraum project becomes apparent: its historical background is highly specific, the identities of the protagonists can be retrieved, the mementos are not empty, exchangeable shells. “The Archive of the Grandparents” can be considered an archive in the traditional sense.

Behind the curtain

The meaning of “The Archive of the Grandparents” in the context of the exhibition “Backstage”, 2017, will depend on whether it is considered as an archive in the traditional sense or if it is understood in the framework of postmodern artistic archives as defined above.

³⁰ As noted by Ernst van Alphen in Alphen, E. V. 2009, p. 139.

³¹ Marsh, G. 1989. The White and the Black: An Interview with Christian Boltanski. In: *Parkett 22* (December 1989), p. 39.

If taken as an archive, its place within the exhibition becomes almost illustrative, as a figure in a manual, so to speak. In “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, 1959, sociologist Erving Goffman provided a model to describe social life, making a clear distinction between front performance and backstage activity³². Though this archive cannot be consulted, the boxes contain the belongings of the students’ grandparents, the testimony of a historical time that, as explained above, at the moment when the project was being developed (in the mid 1990s), had been utterly silenced within the families. Therefore, the installation is the “backstage” of these family constellations (that can very well represent the common experience of the German family at that time), the place where the suppressed narratives of the family’s experience during the Nazi period make their appearance. The location of the piece within Leuphana University adds another layer of meaning to this archive as backstage. As explored lengthily in the other parts of the exhibition, the premises of the university were initially erected with a military purpose: the buildings are the barracks of the 47th Infantry Regiment and the parts of the 110th Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht, the latter together with some other military units (Infantry Division 35, Infantry Division 129) responsible for the Ozarichi massacre in Belarus (1944). To convert such architecture into a university can be considered positive at a functional, and also at a symbolic level, if we bear the hope and desire that education is a means to cultivate peace, liberty and justice, values that potentially counteract the drives and mindsets that ended up in a disaster of the proportion of the Third Reich (which can be metaphorically represented by military buildings, for instance). However, the second life of these buildings can have the effect of concealing the past, as, without a historical perspective, only the present (or, in Goffman’s terminology, the front performance) becomes visible, while the past becomes virtually erased. In such case, “The Archive of the Grandparents” is a “backstage” of the Leuphana University Lüneburg, which surfaces as a reminder that, beyond today’s lively and oblivious academic normality, history occurred, and it is not forgotten.

If, on the other hand, “The Archive of the Grandparents” is considered as a postmodern artistic archive, its meaning within “Backstage”, 2017, becomes more complex. It should, in any case, be clarified that, though the previous section (“The false meta-archive”) establishes that Boltanski’s intention of developing another of his self-reflective archival pieces was truncated, he ended up setting the piece in such form that it could still hold his signature. For instance: he confined all the personal information gathered by the students in the room beside, and in the one he occupied, the boxes were sealed, so that even though the information contained was not anonymous, it could never be accessed. In this sense, it is possible to regard it a postmodern meta-archive.

If considered as such, its presence in “Backstage”, 2017, becomes an interesting curatorial decision in a show that can otherwise be considered a straightforward historical exhibition sustained in a meticulous academic research. Scholarly investigation stands on the faith in the archive and the document. Though this exhibition is weaved upon the nuances of historical research, it nevertheless puts forth a concrete narrative of history. To include a postmodern archival work of art can be well described as a deconstructive move, as “The Archive of the Grandparents” becomes the point

³² Goffman, Erving 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, p. 69.

where the exhibition itself dissolves: on the one hand, the historical narrative of the “backstage” of the city of Lüneburg is scrupulously knit, and on the other, this metaphorical fabric finds its centrifugal point of dissolution in an artwork which questions the narratives of history, the limits of the archive and the nature of the document.

This deconstructive interpretation of “The Archive of the Grandparents” in the context of “Backstage”, 2017, would be in tune with the part of the exhibition titled “Megalothymia”. The term, coined by Francis Fukuyama³³, designates the need to be recognized as better than others, the kind of hubris that became the driving force of the National Socialist ethos. This part of the exhibition documents the plans and strategies devised by the 110th Division and other units, like the Luftwaffe Kampfgeschwader 26, with its group II based in Lüneburg since 1937 and especially its Commander in 1938, Wolfram von Richthofen, who was responsible for the bombing of Gernica in 1937, and Warsaw in 1939, and bring its dystopian military superiority to its full realization. The perverse Nazi ideal of German efficiency is epitomized by the systematic and optimized machinery of massive extermination they created. Concentration camps are the perfect example of how the archival mode of distribution and classification was at the centre of this perfected chain of doom. In this regard, “The Archive of the Grandparents” can be a catalyst for the critical re-examination for the notion of archive, whose supposed objective efficiency is at the heart of the fantasy of dominance, whether it be the dominance of knowledge, or of other human beings.

These two interpretations of “The Archive of the Grandparents” within the framework of “Backstage”, 2017, are not mutually exclusive, and this fact is precisely the asset of an artistic approach to topics as convoluted and entangled as memory in Germany in the aftermath of the Third Reich. Interpretations and learning processes may be manifold, without having to reach a final, decisive, “winning” perspective. The richness and the interest lays in the grounded and fleshed-out pursuit of each reasoning, which remains open to be responded and to continue an on-going dialectical discussion. This is underscored by the fact that twenty years after the completion of “The Archive of the Grandparents”, 1996, it does not only still raise questions pertinent to the contemporary status quo, but it also allows for cross-generational analyses in the perception and treatment of the recent history in Germany. Art, concretized in this case in Christian Boltanski’s piece, opens up a metaphorical space in which the rules and pressures of cultural reality are temporarily suspended (for instance, the students of the project could ask questions that otherwise would have been tacitly forbidden). This special status generates an analytic distance through which the topics at stake can be tackled in an experimental manner, transcending the immediate moral judgments and politically correct answers that sometimes become the result of an otherwise well-intended education (as demonstrated by Harald Welzer³⁴). For these reasons, in the framework of the educational institution of Leuphana University of Lüneburg, the exhibition “Backstage”, 2017, and in particular, the inclusion of a work of art such as “The Archive of the Grandparents”, could be seen as exemplary of a view of education based on freedom and critical

³³ Fukuyama, Francis 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press. p. 304.

³⁴ See note 5.

resistance, consistent with Jacques Derrida's high aspirations for the humanities of tomorrow³⁵. The discussion on "The Archive of the Grandparents" attests, that the possibilities of an artistic approach on these bases is immense.

³⁵ Derrida, Jacques. 2001. The University Without Condition. Originally delivered as a lecture at Stanford University in 1998: *The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (Thanks to the 'Humanities,' What Could Take Place Tomorrow)*. In Cohen, Ted (ed.) 2001. *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. pp. 24-57.