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“Ephemeral Heritages”

From Conservation to Process: The Efficacy of the Digital

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Heritage's ephemeral nature has posed problems for a Western tradition which, from Quatremère de Quincy to Hannah Arendt, has seen in the permanence and conservation of works of art the guarantee of cohesion in the human world. This problem arises with new acuteness in the contemporary era, for artworks are today conserved in digital formats that fail to avoid the wearing of time. In order to grasp which procedures allow digital heritages to be transmitted all the same, the concept of process defined by Hannah Arendt is analyzed for its applicability to the work of Christian Boltanski, whose interest in the conservation of digital archives extends only so far as they are also instruments of action and interaction.

Keywords: action, artwork, conservation, ephemeral, heritage, process.

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The permanence of artworks

There appears little need to dwell on the self-evident facts that no human work is in fact immortal and that should any object be removed from the cycle of consumption and use, no sooner would it be worn down and threatened with disappearance. Zeuxis's grapes have disappeared, the Victory of Samothrace has lost its arms, and only an accident saved the mosaics of Pompeii, the volcanic eruption protecting them from damage. Yet, the destiny of these works was that they remain

undiminished throughout the ages, and their deterioration is fortuitous. In the history of Western thought, works of art are thus objects destined to endure, whence the idea that they are connected with a principle of permanence. This is a principle, a postulate, in the sense that though it may fail to be evident the proposition is no less necessary. What is the practical law governing this proposition? Nothing less than that which governs the humanity of humans. Hannah Arendt's thesis in *The Human Condition* proceeds as such: "Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time." If a human were not surrounded by enduring works, he or she would not be human: "But without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human."¹

The objects in question are as much artisanal and technical as, strictly speaking, artistic. In contrast with the fleeting nature of action or of work subordinated to the satisfaction of constantly recurring needs, once they have been produced, human artifacts are equipped with their own lives. Able to withstand attack from the voracity of humans, they form the base of a stable world that stands between humanity and nature, and confronted with which the subject discovers his or her place. Their permanence makes them a fixed point from which movement is no longer a permanent flux, but becomes signifying, and through which human life becomes existence.

From this perspective, artworks command an undeniable superiority over technical or practical objects, which makes them the most objective of objects and allows them to ensure a more solid guarantee of the human world:

Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things [...]. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art [...].²

Being the most durable parts of the world, artworks build a space beyond human life that can form a real home. Made of human hands, they are the reality of the deep yearning for a world that does not change. Their duration cannot thus be separated from the task that art can and should carry out: that of offering a possible refuge to a humanity traumatized by the thought of its finite nature. Without the immortality of artworks,

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 8, 135.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 167-168.

humanity would be effectively deprived of relief, constantly drawn back into the flight of time and the natural ephemerality of life. Thanks to it, they open upon a humanity forged in yesteryear and which endures beyond today. By theorizing this institution of human community through the (art) work's mediation, Hannah Arendt follows a line of thought that Quatremère de Quincy formulated in 1815 in similar terms:

The idea of the ancient bestows upon monuments, as much as people, a character of respect and veneration. We admire in them that tendency that saved them from the hand of time; they seem privileged; the simple fact of their conservation makes them appear to be marvellous objects. [...] My eyes see that which Pericles, Plato or Cesar saw. [...] I possess, therefore, what they possessed; a sort of community forms between us, making us at once contemporaries and compatriots.³

The essential characteristics of this reflection are found in the analysis developed in *The Human Condition*: the artwork is conceptualized following the model of the monument, its conservation abolishes time and helps to make it worthy of admiration. The human of yesterday and the human of today know they belong to the same world. From this point of view, permanence is not limited to an exclusively temporal sense. The work's duration makes the creation of place possible, because one cannot find refuge in a place that disintegrates. For Arendt, this place is part of the monument's space, which is the symbol of the human community as constituted throughout time, but whose consideration as a reality is impeded by the flight of time. Recalling that Mnemosyne is mother of the arts, Hannah Arendt shows that humans should craft objects that allow them to create a humane world. Permanence, stability and longevity become the ideals of *homo faber*, creator of the world. The artist pushes this ideal to its highest state of accomplishment, in that an ongoing relationship with humans is conditional upon the over-objectivity of the artwork.

But from the artwork as object to the artwork as home, there is a somewhat awkward step to take. For the work to be more than just the *objectum* against which subjects oppose themselves, but rather that in which they find relief, it must relinquish strict independence and become the extension of the

³ Quatremère de Quincy (Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère, dit), *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art*, Paris, Fayard, 1989, p.67: "L'idée de l'ancienneté imprime aux monuments, comme aux hommes, un caractère de respect et de vénération. Nous admirons en eux cette prédilection du sort qui les a sauvés de la main du temps; ils nous semblent privilégiés; le fait seul de leur conservation les rend pour nous objets merveilleux. [...] Mes yeux voient ce qui fut vu par Périclès, par Platon, par César. [...] Je possède donc ce qu'ils ont possédé; c'est une sorte de communauté qui s'établit entre nous, et nous rend un moment contemporains et compatriotes."

subjects it welcomes. With respect to technical objects, this process arises because their permanence and the use to which they may be put help to make them familiar. This is quite possibly the reason why the digital is considered to be a *medium* that brings the audience closer to artworks: its familiarity to us blurs the objective dimension of the artwork. At the same time, the question arises as to whether or not, by integrating artworks into the flux of ordinary human life, digital media in fact dissipate artworks' permanence into an incessant flux of ephemeral images.

The primacy of action

One finds an answer to this question in the connection between the artwork and action in Arendt's thought. While it may be evident that the artwork gives the guarantee of a stable and permanent world, it remains all the same but a correlate of the activity that is the efficient cause of the world, namely, action. Indeed, we rely upon action to take account of the existence of the human community. "Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history."⁴ The permanence of artworks is connected with this condition, in that it is the generation of memories which allows the institution of public space to be reinforced. Certainly, one cannot be relieved of this correlate, so that the action and the artwork are linked by a relationship of interdependence: "[...] acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all."⁵ But the artwork edifies less the public space than the conscience of this space generated by the action, a conscience which, because it extends beyond the here and now, is also memory. As such, the artwork is the place of commemoration.

But in Hannah Arendt's analyses, the conservation of the artwork whose duty is to remember is not alone in guaranteeing a transmission from one generation to the next. In *The Human Condition* one finds another model of transmission, that of processes triggered by action. Action like "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world"⁶ and in this it begins something which necessarily continues but whose ending cannot be foretold. As Arendt demonstrates, each action has its own efficacy and supposes a projection through time that is not

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 8.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 173.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 8.

limited to the present alone. Thus, the increasing role of action in art since the 1950s should perhaps not be understood as a simple eulogy to the fleeting and the ephemeral. Relying upon action rather than the artwork does not necessarily annul art's vocation to render permanent. For action is characterized by its instigating processes whose relationship between cause and effect can span enormous tracts of time. Therefore, the permanence of an action resides in these processes, while the action itself remains fleeting. This is what Arendt analyzes when comparing the process of fabrication with that of action:

While the strength of the production process is entirely absorbed in and exhausted by the end product, the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures in the realm of human affairs are these processes, and their endurance is as unlimited, as independent of the perishability of material and the mortality of men as the endurance of humanity itself. The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end.⁷

One may then say that the artwork's permanence always gives way to the wearing of time, especially considering that it is captive to a materiality that remains fragile and condemns it to the finite, while the duration of an action is in fact infinite. This has the following consequences within the domain of art: the appearance of actions as a mode of expression does not imply the disappearance of a concern with permanence, but modifies the manner in which it is envisaged. One would no longer search for permanence in stable forms that would save the lives of mortals from disappearance and be the condition for human immortality, but in the infinite development of processes triggered by human activity. It should also be noted that this link between action and the idea of process corresponds in Arendt's thought with a turn characteristic of modernity in its manner of conceiving history. A chapter in *Between Past and Future* gives a full account of this concept. In fact, modernity no longer conceives of history as the space in which human actions are torn from their contingency so as to be immortalized, but as a process triggered by a contingent action, that has neither beginning nor end. This shift implies that "permanence is entrusted to a flowing process, as distinguished from a stable structure" which "establishes a space-time in which the very notion of an end is virtually inconceivable"⁸. Beginning with this concept of process, the present analysis will suggest how

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 233.

⁸Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Viking, 1961, p. 75.

one can rethink the question of heritage so as to understand better the possible function of turning towards the digital. Indeed, it may be that one needs to envisage a digital heritage not as a form of conservation that fails to save works from disappearance, but as a guarantee that is procedural and which in a sense *acts upon the work*.

For, even though Arendt's thought is essentially situated in the political domain, her reflection upon action has the capacity to grasp two modes of expression characteristic of contemporary art, performance and temporary or ephemeral installations. What changes with the digital is that the capturing of images is coupled with the possibility for intervention by the audience, who is also the viewer. In this respect, the problem posed by the ephemeral nature of digital heritages can be surmounted by the possibility for action which the medium offers. And in this respect, the ephemeral or temporary artwork, recorded with an apparatus that is itself in a phase of becoming, aligns with the very life of humans and lives off the network that is developing between them. For, the life of the network is conditioned upon a connection between action and process that could not develop without intersubjectivity:

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. [...] Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, [...] in which action alone is real, that it "produces" stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or artworks, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material.⁹

According to Arendt, the process triggered by the action, which saturates the whole network of human relationships, produces stories that themselves prolong existence. But their reification in works of art renders them strangers, in nature, to the liveliness of action. Yet it appears that the technical processes of the digital avoid precisely this reification. With its flux-images, some of action's living reality remains. Digital back-up in fact allows the life of action processes to be prolonged. But the "living reality" would not here be sustained unless it also allowed for human participation and inserted itself into a network of human relationships. Indeed, the backing-up techniques of digital devices is precisely what sets them apart from traditional forms of guarantee, such as the photographic or

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 183-184.

filmic image. To illustrate this point, I would now like to present the work of an artist who is both strongly attached to the question of memory and, curiously, concerned with producing ephemera. From Christian Boltanski's body of work, I would like to select a number of artistic forms that embody a shift. Beginning with the collection of archives that appear located in the issue of conservation, this artist has become progressively interested in creating works that give the digital image the function of activating memory and triggering processes, rather than the role of conserving.

Christian Boltanski: the collection of traces

In 1969, Christian Boltanski published *Recherche et présentation de tout ce qui reste de mon enfance. 1944-1950*, assembling different documents onto nine pages, such as a class photo and a school essay. This work inaugurated a long series of autobiographical works that resemble autofictions, where Boltanski is concerned less with speaking of his childhood than with the childhood itself. The idea runs throughout his entire oeuvre is that "everyone carries inside themselves a dead child." This obsessive theme is translated formally by the collection of traces, drawing us into the problem of conservation as art's necessary, but impossible, task. "I think art is an attempt to hold off death and the flight of time [...]. Art is a kind of failure, a fight that can't be won. [...] You can't conserve anything, but [...] it is certain that all the archiving work that I've done since the beginning, this desire to keep a trace of everything, translates a desire of this sort, a desire to stop death."¹⁰ Yet Boltanski has a paradoxical relationship to conservation: he admits that his studio resembles an excavation site in which he can, like an archaeologist, extract documents that he recycles in his new works, but he nevertheless claims to keep nothing and to have little taste for conserving the vestiges of his own past. His first pieces in the 1970s already express this contradictory attitude: alongside actions, parcels, letters and other ephemeral creations, Boltanski began to accumulate the rusted metal boxes and black and white photographs that have become the elements of his vocabulary.

In *Essais de reconstruction, Vitrines de référence* and *Inventaires* he exhibited photographs in drawers or in family photo albums to reconstitute the real or fictive lives of

¹⁰ Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *La Vie possible de Christian Boltanski*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 86-87: "Je pense que l'art est une tentative d'empêcher la mort, la fuite du temps... [...] L'art est une sorte d'échec, un combat que tu ne peux pas gagner. [...] Tu ne peux rien conserver, mais [...] il est certain que tout le travail d'archivage que je fais depuis le début, cette volonté de garder trace de tout, traduit un désir de ce genre, un désir d'arrêter la mort."

anonymous people (for example, *L'Album de photographies de la famille D.*, 1970); he manipulated documents to construct false autobiographies (the 1971 *Vitrine de référence* exhibits the false memories of his childhood); he created an inventory of objects that have become relics of the dead (*Inventaire des objets ayant appartenu à une femme de Baden-Baden* of 1973 presents furniture and objects bought from a deceased estate). In these works, the document, be it epistolary, administrative or photographic, occupies a central place. It is treated there as an archive issuing from a will to conserve, and not as a document found by chance, even if on occasion it was chosen in an arbitrary fashion or was the product of the artist, and so is not in itself an archive. Furthermore, the document is often falsified: rarely do the sources that Boltanski uses have the significance that he gives them. This artistic work needs to be distinguished from the approach of the archivist or historian. While the archivist preserves the document, keeping it safe from the wear and tear to which it would be exposed, circulating in everyday networks, Boltanski has little consideration for the things themselves, just as he has little regard for his material works which he considers to be ephemeral. His gesture therefore only simulates that of the curator. As such, his work is profoundly paradoxical in its approach: it fights against death by conservation and presents conservation as a new form of death.

Conservation as an issue concerns as much the archive as the museum, which has always attracted Boltanski's attention: the museum also saves works from disappearance by tearing them from their time and place of origin, and by giving them the appearance of absence, of being utterly detached from the life which gave birth to them. The museum mortifies that which it conserves. The reification of a story in the archive is ripped from the flux of the *vita activa* by the museum, in Hannah Arendt's terminology. For this reason, museums are to Boltanski "places without reality, places outside the world, protected." And when the artist remembers his childhood fascination for the windows of the museum of anthropology, the Musée de l'Homme, which contained objects belonging to lost civilizations, he also evokes their morbidity: "In the case of the Musée de l'Homme, as with my *Inventaires*, they cannot bring someone back to life, and it is not because you label and archive that the person is there."¹¹ If the archival document permits a struggle against forgetting, it does not permit a struggle against absence, and it fails to witness: it is not a living speech, but an absence that evokes a lost presence. If it allows a portrait of someone to be made, it will always be a hollow portrait. In this

¹¹ Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *La Vie possible de Christian Boltanski*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 78: "des lieux sans réalité, des lieux hors du monde, protégés"; "dans le cas du musée de l'Homme, comme dans le cas de mes *Inventaires*, on ne peut faire revivre personne, et ce n'est pas parce que tu étiquettes, que tu archives, que la personne est là."

way the museum builds a historicity, but it is a “historicity of death,” following Merleau-Ponty’s formulation in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (“Le langage indirect et les voix du silence”). They work for the benefit of an “official and pompous history”:

We occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to *end up* between these morose walls [...]. We are well aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead [*recueillement de nécropole*] is not the true *milieu* of art —that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not *destined* to reflect one day the Museum’s mournful light.¹²

But the question remains of knowing how to fight against the disappearance of this joy, this anger and this labor that forms the very life of men and nourishes the work of artists. Neither the museum preserved work nor the archived document suffices, because being dependent upon “somber pleasures of retrospection,”¹³ they function counter to the living historicity of the expressive gesture. The archive and the museum do not allow one to see that moment when, in the life of a man or woman, the tradition that he or she takes up and the tradition that he or she establishes become tied together in a single gesture. The function of the archive, like that of the museum, is not only salutary: it establishes a conscience of the past, but does not permit the fighting against death. Over the course of the 1970’s, Boltanski’s works appeared to remain within this formulation of the paradox of the archive which is another way of saying the failure of art, or at least, an art of the object. Renouncing the possibility of fighting against a death that strikes humans as much as artworks when the act of retrospection attempts to save them from being forgotten, this may only be the latest version of a fight that is already lost.

This renunciation is not unrelated to the direction that Christian Boltanski’s works took over the course of the 1980s. From the installation, *Leçons de ténèbres* in the chapelle de La Salpêtrière in 1986, he made his works inseparable from their location, and progressively, he made a habit of destroying the exhibited objects at the end of each installation. In this way he assumed more directly the fact that the purpose of his art is not

¹²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary, Evanston, Northwest University Press, 1964, p. 62: “[...] *histoire officielle et pompeuse*”; “*En nous promenant dans le musée, l’idée nous vient de temps à autre que ces œuvres n’ont pas été faites pour finir entre ces murs moroses [...]. Nous sentons bien qu’il y a déperdition et que ce recueillement de nécropole n’est pas le milieu vrai de l’art, que tant de joies et de peines, tant de colères, tant de travaux n’étaient pas destinés à refléter un jour la lumière triste du Musée [...].*”

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary, Evanston, Northwest University Press, 1964, p. 62: “*sombres plaisirs de la retrospection.*”

to transmit objects, but rather to transmit ideas. This transmission through the idea is rooted in an Oriental rather than a Western tradition, that of the men in Japan who have become “living monuments.” Boltanski creates works whose materiality is ephemeral but whose idea may be picked up and reworked. However, for picking up and reworking to occur, the work must have a certain strength and it must also produce an effect, which leads one back to Hannah Arendt’s analyses of action and process. Permanence is entrusted to a process of becoming, one which is not completed once the installation is finished because viewers find themselves changed while their own path has modified the work. The impossible act of conservation gives way to processes driven by interaction with the audience that also allow for a different conception of heritage. The human community is no longer guaranteed by the permanence of the object, the conserved work, but rather by the strength of processes it instigates in the here and now, and which constitute the memory of an artwork, conditioning its future.

I would like to show this by turning to three recent works by Boltanski, in which the digital plays a central role: *Les Archives du cœur* on the Japanese island of Teshima in 2010, the installation *Chance* at the Venice Biennale in 2011, and the project of recording his own life, begun in 2010, following the suggestion of David Walsh. These three works use the digital but do not maintain the same relationship to time: the first is a permanent installation, the second was taken down after the Biennale and the last exists only in a state of process that will not be finished before Boltanski’s death. I would like to show how the use of the digital in these works allows one to conceive of heritage as an active form that overcomes the alternative between ephemeral and permanent.

The efficacy of the digital

The *Archives du cœur* project was first seen at the Maison Rouge in Paris during the Autumn Festival in 2008 and was subsequently enriched with new recordings, notably at the margins of his Monumenta, *Personnes* installation at La Nef of the Grand Palais in 2010, forming a collection of thousands of beating hearts indexed by name and date:

I’m in the process of creating a “library of hearts.” In addition to the beating of my own heart, for three years I’ve been recording the beating of the hearts of those who wanted to participate, in a booth that has travelled round the world, from Seoul to Berlin, passing by Stockholm. They will perpetuate memory just like photographs. One will be able to listen to the heart of his or her father or aunt, among

hundreds of millions of others, all named and indexed.¹⁴

These digital archives are the extension of an idea for a piece that Boltanski wanted to make for the year 2000: the inventory of all of humanity's names. Unable to bring this project into light —whose very duration made it impossible, since at every instant men, women and children died while new people were born— he made the *Abonnés du téléphone* installation at the Musée d'art moderne in Paris. *Les Archives du cœur* goes even further, since the digital recording allows each name to be associated with a beating heart. In this way, it is as if the archive's "historicity of death" is combated by a "historicity of life," and on three different levels. The beating of the hearts are twice backed-up: firstly, on the island of Teshima but also in the form of a recording given back to each person who volunteered for the recording. The common heritage is in this way reproduced with an individual back-up that is less certain, but also more emotionally charged. On a second level, a great number of visitors to the island of Teshima have made a long journey, and arriving at the site, each can choose to listen to the beating of a particular heart; the work opens a space that allows the visitor a strong emotional engagement. Finally, the power of the sound of the beating hearts played throughout the site is such that it vibrates in each and every one, the sound archive resonating here with the very life of the body. In this work, a heritage has certainly been constituted thanks to digital technology, but conservation is itself surpassed in experience by the perceiving body.

In all of Boltanski's works, as bodily as the experience may be, it is no less conceptual. In *Chance*, made for the Venice Biennale, photographs of Polish babies traverse a monumental apparatus, coming to a halt with the sound of a violent alarm. This profusion of images reveals a limit specific to digital recording: the ephemeral quality of the digital does not come from a strictly temporal dimension but the multiplication of images that one cannot take the time to watch or remember. Boltanski had already offered an installation treating this question at the first Triennale of the Grand Palais, *La Force de l'art* in 2006: his piece showed images from current affairs reeling across a giant screen at high speed, an incessant flux that the viewer could stop by pushing a button. The process resumed in *Chance*: in a small room, photographs of the faces of

¹⁴ Dossier Boltanski [online] <http://www.et-alors.org/dossier-dans-hors-murs/Christian-Boltanski.html> [accessed 20th December 2013]: "Je suis en train de constituer une 'bibliothèque des cœurs.' En plus des battements de mon propre cœur, j'ai, depuis trois ans, enregistré ceux des personnes qui le souhaitent, dans une cabine qui a fait le tour du monde, de Séoul à Berlin en passant par Stockholm. Elles perpétueront la mémoire à la manière des photographies. On pourra écouter le cœur de son père, de sa tante, parmi des centaines de milliers, tous répertoriés et nominatifs."

children and adults cut in three sections flash across the screen, while visitors can try their luck by pushing a button, freezing and assembling the top, middle and bottom parts of a face. If, with this push of the button, one has managed to assemble the entire face of a single person, music sounds and one wins the work. The original archive finds itself here reconstituted by the visitor who gives birth to a work by a gesture integrating chance. The viewer is actor and random creator of a monster or of a human face.

At the same time, giant numbers tick over, an algorithm recording the number of deaths that occur each day, while in the next room, another algorithm records the clocking up of births. In addition to *Chance*'s installation pieces, chairs were placed around the pavilion which talked to visitors. Philippe Zimmermann conceived this piece which involved placing beneath everyday 1940s dining chairs —the years in which Christian Boltanski was born— digital recorders that are activated by the pressure of the visitor's buttocks. When one sat down, one heard for example: "How did you die?" or "Did you suffer?." These questions are both intimate and universal, reminding each of his or her generic humanity.

Boltanski's installation thus assures the transmission of a work by mediating what is most intimate in one's life, one's conscience and one's lived experience, which he brings into play through the intervention of the digital archive. The digital becomes therefore something other than an archive, participating in the activation of a memory that goes beyond strict individuality so as to take on a generic dimension. In this activating, one can see the possible connection between memory and history that Hannah Arendt analyzes in *The Human Condition*:

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action.¹⁵

The conversion of the intimate into something universal is in fact rendered possible by technical processes, adding to a work's collective and historical dimension. This shift from intimate to communal histories occurs in Boltanski's career during the 1970s: his inventories exhibit the everyday traces of ordinary existence, from which the artist extracts everything that might have been personal. The intimate remains within the realm of that which the viewer of these vestiges projects onto their

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 184.

neutrality, seeing in them echoes of his or her own life. But this obsession with the ordinary that, because it is ordinary, can become common and shared by other subjects, finds its full expression in one of the artist's last projects where all potentialities are developed through digital media. Since January 2010, David Walsh, a Tasmanian art collector who made his fortune through gambling, has set up two sophisticated cameras in Boltanski's studio, filming non-stop, 24/7. Boltanski only accepted the offer because the images are images of everyday life. Offering one's life as an example is acceptable only on the condition that nothing be done to conceal its mediocrity, average taste and everyday concerns. And Boltanski has turned this into one of the major concerns of his teaching to students of the *École des Beaux-arts de Paris*: "It is very important for them to know an artist, and to know that artist on a day to day level: to know that I smoke a pipe, that I'm always doing the same thing."¹⁶

The transmission of the work by the idea and not by the object assumes that the artist witnesses his or her own way of being in the world, which is a very communal way of addressing a very singular problem. There is as such nothing indecent in the permanent recording of what goes on in Boltanski's studio, for it reveals nothing more of the life of the artist than his obsession with collecting traces. These images are sent to a cave in Tasmania where they are conserved and projected live. In return, Walsh sends Boltanski a pension. For the operation to be profitable, the billionaire that financed the project "has made a bet that I'll be dead within eight years. In the meantime, he sends me an annuity. If I die beforehand, he will have won because he will have paid less than anticipated. If I die after, I'm the winner. In the meantime, the DVDs are piling up and, for as long as I'm alive, he can't do anything with them." This project thus reconciles numerous space-times: the present of the recording, its continuous broadcast in another place and the permanence of the DVDs. But for as long as the artist is alive, this performance remains a dead trace, and only his death will make it possible for the digital archive to give birth to new processes.

Everything continues therefore as if the problem formulated by Hannah Arendt—to guarantee the human world through the permanence of artworks—were here inverted: guaranteeing the human world involves evoking its constant disintegration, its irrevocable mediocrity, an evocation that awakens in each the feeling of his or her humanity and in the artwork the universal

¹⁶ Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *La Vie possible de Christian Boltanski*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 223: "Il est très important pour eux de connaître un artiste, et de le connaître au quotidien: savoir que je fume la pipe, que je répète toujours les mêmes histoires."

dimension that harbors intimacy¹⁷. “Has not all ephemeral art sought to conserve its trace, its designs and maps?,” asks Christine Buci-Glucksmann. The digital allows a shift in the question of conservation: transmission is no longer assured through the permanence of the artwork in time, but through the opening of a common space and transitory sites. “My desire to survive [...] expresses itself in three principal ways,” Christian Boltanski confided in Catherine Grenier, “the few real tombs that I was able to install, the possibility and hope that my works are going to be picked up and reworked by people, and then the composition of a sort of exemplary life.”¹⁸ The digital allows this to be situated on three levels: the *Archives du coeur* is this tomb that one must go to visit in a distant cemetery, *Chance* is replayed at every visit and will need to be repeated to have a chance of living again, and the recording of the life of Christian Boltanski offers us an example of a life that is exemplary because it is ordinary.

The past’s transmission no longer occurs under the dead hand of conservation but within the living form of an active memory. The excessive objectivity of artworks is replaced with an excess of human subjectivity and the projection of the intimate into the universal. In so doing, digital works, like works appropriated by the digital, assume more Arendt’s concept of process than that of conservation, and, according to her distinction in *The Human Condition*, they belong to the category of action rather than the category of the artwork. They remain therefore in this temporal instability that characterizes what Christine Buci-Glucksmann terms “post-ephemeral” images.¹⁹ The shift that takes place with digital processes may thus be summed up as such: the conservation of the artwork in a place that tears itself from the temporal flux gives way to spaces where heritage fractures into a succession of images that only the viewer may stop by attempting to act upon a technology that witnesses his or her humanity. The digital therefore allows the trace’s discourse to be inflected by opening it to the possibility of being actively reworked as a process where human contingency is not effaced.

¹⁷ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 16: “*Tout art éphémère n'a-t-il pas toujours cherché à conserver sa trace, son tracé ou ses cartographies?*”

¹⁸ Christian Boltanski and Catherine Grenier, *La Vie possible de Christian Boltanski*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 230: “*Mon désir de survie [...] s'exprime de trois façons principales: les quelques tombes réelles que j'ai pu installer, la possibilité et l'espoir que des gens vont rejouer mon œuvre, et puis la constitution d'une sorte de vie exemplaire.*”

¹⁹ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 17: “*post-éphémères.*”

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