The main theme of French artist Christian Boltanski’s work is the question of how we perceive the past. His installation *Archive of German Members of Parliament*, created for the basement on the east side of the Reichstag Building, is related intimately to the building’s past and present. Some 5,000 metal boxes bear the names of all the democratically elected Members of Germany’s parliaments from 1919: the National Assembly (the constitutional convention of 1919–1920), the Reichstag during the Weimar Republic, and the German Bundestag. The period covered in the installation ends with 1999, the year in which parliamentary business resumed in the Reichstag Building after its remodelling by British architect Norman Foster. A single black box recalls the years when the German people were not represented by a democratically elected assembly. They are, as it were, the ‘black years’ for German democracy (an oblique reference to ‘les années noires’, as the French call the years of German occupation).

The boxes are stacked ceiling-high in two long rows; the narrow passageway between them is dimly lit by carbon filament lamps. A separate room is thus created in the corridor which runs between the Jakob Kaiser Building and the Reichstag Building, where Members pass through on the way from their offices to the plenary. In the midst of this busy thoroughfare, this seemingly forgotten basement archive creates an atmosphere of tranquil seclusion which invites reflection and contemplation.

The boxes, with their picturesque ‘rust flowers’, appear from a distance to be layered like brickwork, giving the impression that a wall has been constructed here in the basement beneath the east entrance to the Reichstag Building – a foundation, of its kind, symbolising and honouring Germany’s tradition of democracy in monumental form. The principle of the equality of Members is expressed in visual terms by the sequences of identical boxes. All the Members of Germany’s parliaments are remembered in the same way, whether they spent only two years on the back-benches or played a key role in shaping the fortunes of their country. Only those boxes commemorating Members who were murdered are a little different: they are additionally marked with black bands bearing the words ‘Victim of National Socialism’ and a date of death.

Some Members from the Communist Party fell victim not only to National Socialist but also Stalinist persecution. Many were murdered in the Soviet Union. Their individual fates are retold in the books of remembrance on display in the Members’ Lobby in the Reichstag Building or in the academic literature (a list of murdered Members can be found at www.bundestag.de/boltanski).
The artwork does not name Members of the People’s Chamber of the GDR who were elected from single lists, known as “unity lists”, from 1950 onwards. Also missing are the names of the Members of the People’s Chamber which was constituted after the GDR’s first free elections on 18 March 1990. The artist only includes the names of the 144 (of 480) Members of the People’s Chamber who subsequently became Members of the Bundestag after 3 October 1990. A full list of Members of the People’s Chamber elected on 18 March 1990 can be found at www.bundestag.de/boltanski.

The Jewish School (Berlin 1939), 1992, lithograph, collage, a.p., from the portfolio The Frozen Leopard, part II, Galerie Klüser, Munich 1992

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