

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).

Christian Boltanski

Archive of German Members of Parliament

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, which 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 backbenches 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).



Archive of German Members of Parliament, 1999, metal boxes with labels, carbon filament lamps

Christian Boltanski, born in Paris in 1944, lives and works in Malakoff near Paris.



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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 400) 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.

Archive of German Members of Parliament is one of many installations created by Christian Boltanski on the theme of remembrance and preservation of the past. Boltanski, whose father was a Ukrainian Jew and who was himself born in Paris soon after its liberation from German occupation, seeks in many of his installations to

preserve traces of his own childhood and of other – sometimes fictional – human lives. Sometimes, he uses large, coarse-grained black and white photographs to 'reconstruct' biographies consisting of anonymous portrait photographs of children mounted on wall panels. In conjunction with light bulbs and lamps, the panels resemble commemorative altars symbolic of transience (*Pourim réserve*, 1989, Canberra). The German Bundestag's Art Collection also includes Boltanski's lithograph *The Jewish School (Berlin 1939)* from a portfolio entitled *The Frozen Leopard* (1992). It consists of a photograph, slightly battered and secured with tape – a fragment of a forgotten legacy. The blurred image shows a group of smiling children, yet scarcely one is identifiable. Seeing the happiness on the young people's faces brings a lump to the throat of the viewer, who guesses the uncertain fate that ultimately awaits these children.



Tragedy is also a presence in *Archive of German Members of Parliament*: so many of the boxes are marked with black bands, commemorating Members who were murdered. After the failed plot of 20 July 1944, Heinrich Himmler launched *Aktion Gitter*, a mass arrest campaign which targeted democratic politicians from the Weimar period, sending them to concentration camps. It may be disconcerting at first to see that Christian Boltanski has included in his installation not only these persecuted Members but also their opponents, the National Socialist MPs who served the regime. But he does so because they too were democratically elected to the Reichstag before the introduction of the National Socialist list of approved candidates for the elections in November 1933. *Archive of German Members of Parliament* thus commemorates not only the achievements but also the failures of German parliamentary history.

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

In his art, Christian Boltanski successfully connects aspects of history with deeper questions of human existence. With *Archive of German Members of Parliament*, Boltanski applies his conceptual approach to the Reichstag Building. Each of the Members can be identified by name as a historical figure, and it is this dimension which makes the installation so appealing to many visitors. At the same time, the uniformity in the placement of the boxes is a visual reminder that it took many generations of Members – and especially their struggle against the enemies of democracy – to establish German parliamentarism on a broad and firm foundation.



Art at the German Bundestag Christian Boltanski

