

Christian Boltanski Project Touches Bologna's Traumas, and His Own

BOLOGNA, Italy — The artist Christian Boltanski sat on a bench in a [Bologna museum](#) facing one of the 20 works he had allocated throughout this city and mused on a favorite theme: mortality.

He offered what he smilingly said was a “very pretentious” thought.

“I hope that when I shall be dead, somebody that I don't know in Australia is going to be sad for two minutes,” Mr. Boltanski, who is 72, said. “It would be something marvelous because it means you've touched people you've never seen and that is something incredible.”

The installation before him included a video with dozens of bells on long metal wires set in a blustery snowscape in northern Quebec, the gray sky blurring into the snow so that at times the two were indistinguishable. The suggestion of looming hypothermia was strong. A neon sign next to the installation announced “Arrivée” (“the end”) while another sign at the gallery entrance established “Depart” (“the beginning”).

“I am old, I am arrivée; for me that's my future,” he said. “It's something so strange, to die.”

The piece is part of a retrospective of some 25 installations by Mr. Boltanski at MAMbo, Bologna's municipal museum of contemporary art. With old, new and revisited work, the exhibition, curated by Danilo Eccher, touches on leitmotifs that have infused Mr. Boltanski's forceful production of Conceptual works since the 1960s, addressing human suffering, the complex relationship between memory and the past, and mortality. In Bologna, memory is inextricably linked to a painful episode in the city's history.

In 1980 a plane that took off from Bologna crashed near the island of Ustica, killing 81 passengers en route to Sicily. The cause is still a mystery, and the crash remains a raw, open wound for the city.

Mr. Boltanski, who is French, holds celebrity status here for a permanent installation he designed 10 years ago that defined a commemorative [Museum for the Memory of Ustica](#). Recently he was invited back to create a citywide project in different mediums — a play, billboards, installations — including a public art “intervention” he will curate in a parking lot in September and the exhibition at MAMbo that opened in late June. The special project is [“Anime. Di Luogo in Luogo”](#) (“Souls. From Place to Place”).

“In the Renaissance, artists were invited by a prince or a bishop,” Mr. Boltanski said of the project. “And I am like that; the people of Bologna invited me.”

During the past five years, Bologna has honored artists in various mediums who have had strong connections to the city, including John Cage, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Romeo Castellucci.

Bruna Gambarelli, the Bologna council member overseeing culture, said she chose Mr. Boltanski as the focus for this year's program because of his international stature but also because he “is deeply rooted to our city, through a sincere, real relationship.” (Mr. Eccher curated Mr. Boltanski's first major Italian exhibition in Bologna 20 years ago.)

His art, with its focus on “one humankind, fragile but specific,” also spoke to Bologna's sense of self, Ms. Gambarelli said.

“We were interested in this notion of memory, put into a contemporary key, which fits perfectly in our history,” she said. “It was there, and he was able to seize it, as a great artist does.”

Ms. Gambarelli added that the artist had accepted the challenge of “inhabiting various territories.”

He has installed gigantic billboards of oversized eyes throughout the city's more remote neighborhoods, taking as his models the eyes of Resistance fighters who were killed in [World War II](#), whose photographs are part of a memorial in the Piazza del Nettuno, a plaza abutting Bologna's main square.

"I don't like so much to see my old works, because you can't change it anymore," he said, taking a tour through his installation at the Museum for the Memory of Ustica, which houses the shell of the plane and dozens of (unseen) objects belonging to the victims that were recovered after the crash. Black mirrors with audio line the walls — one per victim — murmuring possible last thoughts. "I like the idea that if you die in a very quick way, your last thought is not for the past but for the future," he said. "Each one says something optimistic."

A similar but more sobering reflection plays out in what Mr. Boltanski described as "something between theater and an installation" that ran at a Bologna [auditorium](#) for a few nights in late June. With his longtime collaborators, the set designer Jean Kalman and the composer Franck Krawczyk, Mr. Boltanski created a fog-filled labyrinth of old furniture covered in white sheets, where black-clad actors mingled with audience members. With Mr. Krawczyk's score as a haunting background, the actors paused occasionally to whisper into a spectator's ears: "Did you suffer much?" "Why did you die?" "Did you see the light?"

Another installation in an abandoned 19th-century powder-keg bunker in an outlying Bologna neighborhood involved a pile of clothing — representing the countless immigrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean on their perilous crossings from Africa — covered by dozens of gold-colored thermal blankets. It created the illusion of a sea of low waves, a powerful reminder of the migration phenomenon. "The blanket is at the same time something tragic and something incredibly beautiful and rich," Mr. Boltanski said to those attending the premiere. "But everyone can see in it what they want to see."

Sitting in MAMbo later in the day, Mr. Boltanski spoke of an coming project in Patagonia, of past projects in Japan and Tasmania, and on being an artist.

"I believe that at the beginning of all the lives of artists is a trauma, and after, all your life, you try to speak about this trauma," each time in a different way, he said.

He recalled his underlying trauma — stories of the Holocaust that he heard from his parents' friends, all survivors, when he was a child in Paris. They formed his art.

"Now that I am so old," he said, "what I try to do is to create mythology, to create legend."

"And at my age, what I wish is that people remember the legend — not me, but the legend."