Mourning or Melancholia: Christian Boltanski’s

Missing House

Abigail Solomon-Godeau

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 really not about the Holocaust, it’s about death in general, about all of our deaths.¹

Much of my early work is about the Holocaust, but I would never have spoken about it in these terms, or pronounced that word. Early pieces... deal with the Holocaust, but the subject matter is displaced and hidden. I could only begin talking about it much later.²

The Missing House – a site specific installation by the French artist Christian Boltanski, produced for and in the city of Berlin in the autumn of 1990 – is not, strictly speaking, missing at all. Rather, the building at 15/16 Grosse Hamburgerstrasse, in the former East Berlin, had its central part blasted away in the allied bombings of 3 February 1945. Two of the building’s central staircases and the apartments on their landings were destroyed; those people in those apartments on those stairwells were perhaps maimed or killed; those living on either side were spared. Eventually, the two remaining parts of the building were reconstructed, their standing walls braced and reinforced, leaving a vacant space, and a vacant lot, between the two supporting walls.

Boltanski’s installation consists of a series of 12 black and white plaques, 120 x 60 cm, mounted on the facing walls, storey by storey, indicating the family name, profession, and period of residency of each tenant who had lived in the bombed out apartments (Fig. 1). During the time of the exhibition, however, a second component of the work was installed in the former West Berlin. There, on the the grounds of the also destroyed Berliner Gewerbe Austellung (an exhibition space for arts and crafts) were placed a number of specially designed museum-like vitrines. Displayed within them were various forms of archival documentation, researched and ferreted out by the art students Christiane Büchner and Andreas Fischer who served as Boltanski’s assistants on this project. These museologically presented artifacts related to the building’s residents; as it happened, two waves of them. For unbeknownst to the artist when he began the project and initiated the accompanying documentation, prior to 1942 many of the building’s residents were Jews. By the time of the bombings, however, those tenants had been evicted, displaced, deported, and presumably liquidated. Thus, when the allied bombing occurred, many of the tenants were German Aryans who had replaced the now-vanished Jewish residents. Non-combattants, those who ended up living in the apartments on the destroyed stairways, may have perished in the bombings; the previous tenants were probably already dead. How should this installation, this work of site specific public art in the now-unified city of Berlin be interpreted, how should it be read?

A consideration of The Missing House and the issues it raises requires some kind of contextualization in terms of Boltanski’s over twenty-five year career and oeuvre. Both celebrants and skeptics routinely characterize Boltanski’s art as one of contradiction. Indeed, whether invoked to describe the self-representation of the artist, or to characterize the conflicting artistic-

¹ Georgia Marsh, 'The White and the Black: about the Holocaust, it’s about death in general, about all of our deaths.1

identifications and formations that inform his production; whether to describe the frame of reference suggested by his different projects (c.f., my epigraphic quotations), or even to indicate how his different works might be discursively situated, critics have had little alternative but to fall back upon the notion of contradiction and with more or less elaboration, consider that as a distinguishing if not defining principle of his production.\(^3\)

Consider, by way of a few examples, the following: Boltanski, whose work since 1968 has consisted of short films, videos, mail art, artists’ books, photo-based projects, work constructed of found or appropriated objects (second-hand clothing, biscuit tins, vernacular photographs) and more rarely, handmade objects such as hand-molded balls of earth or hand-carved sugar cubes, and – increasingly – installation assemblages and environments, describes himself as a painter, although this is a medium he has not employed since 1967. Asked for his primary artistic influences, he invariably names Joseph Beuys (who envisioned himself as a kind of messianic shaman), and Andy Warhol (who regularly – and complacently – described himself as a kind of machine); needless to say, neither of Boltanski’s honorific forebears had much to do with painting. Early work of Boltanski’s would appear to participate in the critique of the museum institution associated with other European artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, and could be viewed as generally linked to the work Marcel Duchamp; much of the later work, conversely, is a

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3. One of the best and most thoughtful of these discussions is Nancy Marmer, “The Uses of Contradiction”, *Art in America*, October 1989, pp. 168–81, 233–35.

willing embrace of the museum’s aura-conferring and sanctifying mechanisms. Many of Boltanski’s works derive their formal effects from seriality, multiplicity, and interchangeability, but at the same time, there is apparent in much of it a nostalgic desire to invest the ensemble, or the series, with the ambience of the sacred, the devotional, the ritualistic. In such works, the historical transition that Walter Benjamin so famously described, by which the work of art evolves from cult value to exhibition value is essentially reversed; installations such as Les Bougies (The Candles) – actually installed in churches among its other venues – as well as assemblages that Boltanski calls ‘altars’ and ‘reliqueries’, appear to be animated by the wish to restore a sacramental identity for the art object (Fig. 2). Not least among these contradictions, and the one I shall explore in this essay, is that which obtains between work that operates in the mode of the generically elegieic and that which performs an act of historical commemoration, a distinction that might be analogized to that drawn by Sigmund Freud between the affliction of melancholia and the work of mourning. This is a contradiction that can be seen to run through Boltanski’s long career, and it is a significant one, for the difference between an art of generic elegy and an art of historical remembrance is not trivial. And where it is a question of an art practice that traffics (in whatever way) with the events of the Second World War, with the Holocaust, with the city of Berlin and the fate of its citizens, both Jewish and ‘Aryan’, the stakes are very high indeed.

That Boltanski should have been among the thirteen artists invited to participate in the city-wide project Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit (The Finitude of Freedom) is not surprising. Certainly, he is among the most well known of mid-career French artists, and one of the few to have garnered international critical recognition. But where certain other of the invited artists such as Hans Haacke and Krzysztof Wodiczko were presumably chosen for the explicitly political dimensions of their work, doubtless it was the way Boltanski’s work, particularly since the 1980s, has been understood to make allusion to the Holocaust that argued for his inclusion. I shall have more to say about this assumption, but it is worth noting that the rationale for Die Endlichkeit, as formulated by Heiner Müller and Rebecca Horn, the project’s initiators, had more to do with Germany’s present, especially the recent unification of the country, than it did with the German past. Consequently, the artists’ projects were supposed to have components either sited in or relevant to the formerly divided city of Berlin in order ‘to describe the reality of East and West both in terms of unity and difference . . . to give inhabitants of the city some idea of what was happening in the present. Consistent with their artistic modus operandi, artists like Haacke and Wodiczko created site specific installations that unambigously engaged with contemporary actuality in unified Berlin. Haacke, for example, availed himself of a watchtower from the former ‘death strip’ in the Kreutzberg area, affixing a large Mercedes-Benz logo to the top, inscribing on the east facing side of the tower the statement ‘Bereit sein ist alles’ (Readiness is everything) and on the opposite side, ‘Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsert – aus der portokasse’ (Now freedom will be simply sponsored – from petty cash). On another side of the tower, he cited Goethe: ‘Kunst bleibt Kunst’ – Art remains Art. Wodiczko, no less mordant in his reflections on the implications of unification, projected upon a monumental statue of Lenin the ghostly image of a rugby-shirted East German Everyman, shopping cart bulging with newly purchased commodities.

Unlike these works which constituted a critical reflection on the manifestly unpoetic realities of the German present, Boltanski’s Missing House would seem

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Fig. 2. Christian Boltanski, Reliquaire, 1990, photographs, lamps, six metal drawers with grill, tin biscuit boxes, 210 × 166 × 42.5 cm (courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery).
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5. One thinks immediately here of the firebombing of Hans Haacke’s Bezugpunkte 38/88 (Points of Reference 38/88) on 2 November 1988 in the city of Stuttgart, as well as the attempt to strip the lead skin off Jochen and Esther Gera’s Monument Against Racism and the neo-fascist graffiti that was written on it.


8. Telephone discussion with Boltanski, November 8, 1996.

to have been conceived as a meditation on the ruins of the past, the past tense of the war, the past tense of the obliterated part of 15/16 Grosse Hamburgerstrasse and its former residents. Because Boltanski’s installation is only one of two remaining in place after the end of the exhibition (Rebecca Horn’s Raum des verwundeten Affen – Room of the Wounded Monkey, is the other), The Missing House is now itself a kind of permanent memorial to loss and absence. As such, the passerby is alerted to the fact that this is a marked site, a commemorative space in which a nothingness has been inscribed with a historical reference, but a reference whose significance remains troublingly enigmatic. Which is to say that where the passerby can readily infer that the plaques denote the dead or dispersed former residents, there is no way to reconstruct the existence of the immediately previous residents, the Jews evicted from the building and deported before 1942. For that matter, there is no way to infer from the site what happened to the building itself; its disappearance could, in theory, have been the consequence of a structural collapse. Such information was the provenance of the temporary installation in the western part of Berlin; the ten vitrines displaying the rent and tax rolls, the history of the street and its mixed neighborhood, and the material relating to the deportations. During the six weeks that these were placed in the recessed and abandoned foundation of the now-disappeared Berliner Gewerbe Ausstellung, the vitrines were vandalized, a not-infrequent fate for antifascist or commemorative artworks in contemporary Germany. In this respect, it is suggestive that the part of the work that provoked hostility was the evidentiary display with its historically specific documentation. One might say there is a kind of discursive split, a division, in the project, analogous to its division between two parts of the city. On the one hand, the ‘work’ of The Missing House in its permanent incarnation is consistent with a growing number of ‘counter-monuments’ in Germany insofar as it takes as its presiding metaphors the historical facts of absence and disappearance. On the other hand, it universalizes these facts, for as I earlier indicated, the genesis of the work involved no consideration of the particular fate of Berlin’s Jews at all, nor of their prior occupancy of the building. Rather, and as Boltanski has himself remarked, ‘What interested me about this project was that you can take any house in Paris, New York, or Berlin, and with that one house, you can reconstruct an entire historical situation.’ But the possibility of apprehending ‘an entire historical situation’ was only to be found in the other – temporary – installation, in the vitrines, and it was only there where the singular history of an apartment building and the fate of its tenants in the years of National Socialism could be reconstructed. For Boltanski himself, the installation, despite the excavated evidence of the fate of its former tenants, is in no way about the Jews of Berlin. It is, he has said, a work about ‘the finger of God’; that is, the absurd and arbitrary contingency that determined that the residents on one stairway would be blown to bits, while those on the other might escape unscathed. This begs the question, needless to say, of why Berlin was being bombed in the first place, but as I would argue, the art of generic elegy, the melancholy acknowledgment of fatality, destiny, or mortality, is wholly inadequate to the historical, indeed to the ethical requirements of historical commemoration.

That Boltanski’s work, however, should be regularly interpreted through the prism of what might be called ‘Holocaust consciousness’ has possibly more to do with his viewers’ perceptions than the artist’s intentions. Although these latter need not be privileged in the act of interpretation, much less aesthetic reception, there is reason to question whether historical events like war and
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genocide are properly subsumed in the wistful acknowledgement of mortal transience. Allusions to mortality and death, singular, collective, or even personal (e.g. Boltanski’s 1969 artist’s book Reconstitution d’un accident qui ne m’est pas encore arrivé et où j’ai trouvé la mort) have clearly been a principle theme in his work from the beginning. But it was really when Boltanski started intensively working with vernacular portrait photographs that the elegiac aspect of his production, and its aura of aestheticized melancholy became a defining if not trademark feature of his work (Fig. 3). It is here, therefore, in the intersection of the spectral and funereal associations of photography itself, its ghostly play of absence and presence, in tandem with Boltanski’s ambivalent invocation of historical circumstance, that I want to consider some of the problems that emerge and anticipate those that are raised by The Missing House.

‘Death,’ wrote Roland Barthes in his last book, Camera Lucida, ‘is the eidos of [the] Photograph.’ Barthes was by no means the first commentator to make the association between photography and death (Walter Benjamin had remarked upon this association in his ‘Short History of Photography’ of 1932), but Barthes’ is the most sustained contemplation of its petrifying, spectral, even uncanny effects. Photography, he writes, ‘... is a denatured theater where death cannot “be contemplated”, reflected and interiorized; or again, the dead theater of Death, the foreclosure of the Tragic, it excludes all purification, all catharsis.’ ‘In the Photograph, Time’s immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged ... That the Photograph is “modern”, mingled with our noisiest everyday life, does not keep it from having an enigmatic point of actuality, a strange stasis, the stasis of an arrest.’

This arrest of time, flux, and movement, the immobilization of the living, congealed in the vanished past, is, Barthes claimed; modernity’s equivalent of the art of the vanitas, the momento mori. The children in Boltanski’s 1972 Mickey Club of 1955, the now-dead Swiss citizens in more recent works or the portraits of the students of the Lentilieres College of Secondary Education, are doubtless presentiments of our own mortality, but as such, the reflections they prompt are essentially solipsistic (Fig. 4). Photography, as Barthes suggested, is the legible form of death that death assumes in a fully secularized modern culture. ‘For death,’ he wrote, ‘in a society, must necessarily be somewhere; if it isn’t any longer – or less so – in religions, it must be elsewhere: perhaps in this image which produces Death while wanting to conserve life. Contemporary with the diminishment of rituals, photography would perhaps correspond to the intrusion in our modern society of an asymbolic death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of plunge into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, that which separates the initial pose from the final sheet of paper.’

Many of Boltanski’s photographic/installation works from the 1980s could well be likened to a gloss or a material illustration of Barthes’ reflections on the medium. In keeping with Barthes’ understanding of the need felt by secularized cultures for a sacral space in which death can be contemplated, Boltanski’s use of photography plays on a general desire to invest this most banal of visual artifacts with the solemnity of a memorial requiem. The sources of Boltanski’s images, the group snapshots, the faces in photo albums, or the obituary portraits are typically republished and enlarged, so that the facial features become progressively generalized and increasingly individuated. Accordingly, as they become less specifically recognizable – less indexical, in semiotic terms – they become more iconic. These formal operations function to transform the individual person into a

10. Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 90

Fig. 3. Christian Boltanski, Reserves: The Purim Holiday, 1989, black-and-white photographs, metal lamps, wire, second-hand clothing, dimensions variable (courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery).
symbolic representation, thus facilitating the viewer’s projection of his or her own mortality (‘It is the blight man was born for,/ It is Margaret you mourn for.’) In those of Boltanski’s works where lamps are affixed above the image to illuminate the faces, or where candles are used, the faces appear haunted, their pathos and their psychological presence further amplified. Furthermore, because so many of these installations are formally organized as votive arrangements, or as altars, shrines, or two-dimensional monuments, the effect of the ensemble is, for many people, emotionally profound, akin to a religious experience (Fig. 5).

Barthes’ reflections on photography and its relation to death, are, of course, ontologically motivated. That is to say, in Camera Lucida, Barthes was concerned to somehow define the essential nature of photography, and the individual images he considered were an almost random selection of personally meaningful images from which he attempted to extrapolate the nature of photography itself. But while he was not in this book concerned with the specificity of historical documentation, or indeed the historical at all, Barthes was throughout his career quick to expose the working of mythic speech and dominant ideologies, nowhere more perniciously (because invisibly) manifested than within bourgeois humanism. As he argued in his withering essay on Edward Steichen’s humanist blockbuster The Family of Man, yes we are all born, yes we all labor, and yes we all die, but in what circumstances, in what state of misery or comfort we are born, labor, and die has everything to do with history, with economics, with politics.13 It is here that we need to consider the difference between what I have termed the generically elegaic — for shorthand, sic in transit gloria mundi — and the real historical conditions and determinations of mortality.

Beginning in the period between 1987 and 1990, Boltanski initiated a series of works based on a 1931 group photograph of the students of Lycée Chases, a Jewish high school in Vienna, in which the thematics of mortality acquired a

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somewhat different resonance (Fig. 6). The individual faces re-photographed and enlarged, the photographs were deployed in arrangements variously constructed and titled as 'monuments', as 'altars', in an artist's book reproducing the rephotographed faces, in other assemblages given the title Odessa Monument, and finally, incorporated with other works with the overall title Leçons de Ténèbres (Lessons of Darkness) (Fig. 7). We may take it for granted that most spectators of these works would make the requisite associations between the date, the place, and the religion of the students and conclude that many if not most, and possibly even all of the students had perished in concentration or labor camps; that, in sum, the mortality here invoked in the photograph was less on the order of the natural rhythms of life and death than on the order of state sponsored genocide. That viewers, especially Jewish viewers in America and Israel, would make this connotative...
linkage was further prompted by the use of elements that Boltanski had employed frequently in other work, namely, the desk lamps that when focused on the image, produced not only an aureole of golden light, but the suggestion of interrogation processes as well. The ubiquitous rusted metal biscuit tin, which Boltanski has employed for years, prompted its own associative train; to coffin-like receptacles for ashes, to containers for personal effects, even as surrogate presences for the absent graves and tombstones of the annihilated millions (Fig. 8). Mutually supporting of this reading of Boltanski’s art were those works, beginning in 1988, that utilized second-hand clothing. His first version, at the Ydessa Handeles Foundation in Toronto, used over 3,000 articles of clothing, along with clamp-on desk lamps for the installation. Stacks of clothing subsequently featured in an installation of the same year in Hamburg, and in 1990, in Japan, they were spread on the floor, the work now titled, even more explicitly, ‘Lac des Morts’ (Fig. 9). For many viewers — again, especially in America and Israel — the overpowering association was to the Holocaust, an association fostered by the way these accumulations recalled the photographs taken of piles of clothes, shoes, and other personal possessions amassed in the concentration camps. Hence, many of the viewers and critics of Lessons of Darkness (whose English title, unlike its French one, is not Christian,
Fig. 7. Christian Boltanski, Lessons of darkness: Le Lycée Chases (detail), 1987, black-and-white photos, metal lamp, biscuit tins (courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery).

Fig. 9. Christian Boltanski, Réserve, 1989, installed at Museum für Gegenwartskunst, (courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery).
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but ecumenically metaphysical) began increasingly to interpret Boltanski’s art as an allegory of the Holocaust, an interpretation to which, in the late 1980s, Boltanski lent himself – however equivocally – by making regular reference in interviews to his Jewish ancestry and to his (ambiguous) relation to Judaism as such.  

Given the vast number of published interviews with Boltanski, and many critics’ desire to secure the meaning of his work via the artists’ own statements, it is important to note that by the early 1970s he had already fully developed his own eponymous alter ego, sometimes designated C.B., and sometimes Christian Boltanski, a personification whose family history, childhood, and psychology provided not only the content of many works, but – to this day – the content of most of his interviews. This blurring of the artist’s identity – both in the putatively autobiographical works and in the interviews – is itself ambivalent. Considered as a quintessentially postmodernist gesture, the self-production of the artist, an elaborate staging of a more or less fictionalized ego, can be said to function as a critical enactment of the Barthesian death-of-the-author, a simultaneous solicitation and frustration of the deeply engrained desire for an author/subject who is the locus and origin of meaning of a work thereby exposing the fugitive and provisional notion of a self – Rimbaud’s ‘Le “je” est un autre’. Militating against such a reading, however, are Boltanski’s repeated references to the artist as a kind of saint, a martyr, a shaman; his identification with Joseph Beuys; his rather peculiar use of and reference to his ‘Jewish’ identifications; his later adaption – immediately after the production of the Vitrines de reference – of the persona of a clown, on which he based performances, installations and other works (Fig. 10). Such identifications and tactics cannot but raise questions as to whether Boltanski is interrogating the role of the mythic artist or actively embracing it.

Be that as it may however, and with respect to the historically specific implications of the photographic installations based on the photographs of the Lycée Chases students, we may well ask what within the structure of Boltanski’s work overall distinguishes a Jewish student killed in a concentration camp from a Swiss bourgeois dead of a heart attack, a now-dead (or elderly) Mickey Club member from a murder victim?

As it happens, this was precisely the problematic of Boltanski’s various versions of Les Archives: Detective, the first version of which he produced in 1987. After acquiring a full year’s run of a French tabloid-type magazine consecrated to murderers and their victims, Boltanski rephotographed the photos and re-presented them in a variety of formats, sometimes in installations featuring stacked archival cartons, environments that themselves mimicked the claustral space and sinister atmosphere of the bureaucratic archive. As one would expect, it is impossible to determine from the photographs whether one is looking at the victim or the murderer, a murdered child, or the victim or murderer as child. The ambiguity of such a demonstration is possibly less interesting than it appears, for as Boltanski himself ingenuously remarked in a number of interviews, terrible people (he was referring here to Klaus Barbie) do not necessarily have terrible faces. However, photography communicates affectively, when it does, not because of its truth content, and certainly not by virtue of its explanatory power, but because of its ability to prompt imaginative and transferential projections on the part of the spectator. There is in fact, and at the risk of tendentiousness, all the difference in the world between the murderer and the victim, even as we acknowledge that the murderer may be himself a victim, and all the difference

in the world between an exterminated Jew and a Swiss citizen dead of natural causes.

Boltanski’s plays on the undecidability of the meaning of a photographed face, accompanied by his impressive orchestration of the funereal connotations of photography itself, have produced works of considerable beauty and wide popular appeal. But the pathos and poignancy that are elicited as the spectator reflects on the ‘blight that man is born for’ is perhaps not so different from the eighteenth century connoisseur’s love of ruins, and the somber, melancholy, and aesthetic pleasure they solicited. Which is to say that where death is a consequence of individual or state violence (as in Detective and Lycee Chases), and therefore hardly a natural occurrence, it should be distinguished from the brute and universal fact of human mortality. To elide these different deaths, these different fates, implies a bottom line equivalency from which ethical distinctions are banished.

In one, somewhat literal sense, Boltanski’s Missing House is an appropriate work for contemporary Berlin because it is fundamentally structured around an absence, a vacancy, a loss. The gap in the building, its central void, presents obvious analogies to what is now absent in German national life, namely, the presence of its once flourishing Jewish community. In its central metaphors
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15. Horst Hoheisel’s Aschrottbrunnen in Kassel involved reconstructing a Gothic revival fountain that had been erected by a Jewish citizen named Aschrott in the nineteenth century. In the 1930s the fountain was demolished because it had been commissioned by a Jew. Hoheisel’s reconstruction was then reversed and sunk into the ground, becoming thereby a ‘negative’ trace of what the fountain had originally been. Gerz’s Square of the Invisible Monument (Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmahls) in Saarbrucken was undertaken at his own initiative. Selecting the plaza in front of the Saarbrucken Schloss, which had served during the war as Gestapo headquarters, Gerz and his students proceeded to clandestinely inscribe the underside of the cobblestones in front of the castle with the names of all the Jewish cemeteries that had existed in Germany before the war, most of which had subsequently disappeared. As Gerz himself commented, ‘Where there are people, there are burial places and when there are a lot of cemeteries and no people, it’s an almost mathematical metaphor for saying that something’s wrong.’ As of 1993, 1958 cemeteries were identified with the help of the remaining 66 Jewish communities in Germany. The Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmahls was inaugurated in 1993. See Miriam Rosen, ‘The Emperor’s New Monument’, Artforum, March 1992, p. 84. See as well, Young, The Art of Memory, (1993).

Fig. 12. Jochen Gerz, 2146 Stones - Monument against Racism, 1993, Saarbrücken (courtesy of the artist).

of loss and absence, it thus shares something with other, more historically nuanced works such as Shimon Attie’s The Writing on the Wall (Die Schrift an der Wind, 1991). Dematerialized, insubstantial, and ghostly, Attie’s work consisted of photographic images of Berlin’s Jewish citizens taken in the 1920s and 1930s, which, transformed into transparencies, were projected upon decayed doorways, dark streets, and warehouse walls in various Berlin neighbourhoods (Fig. 11). The Missing House shares something too with Jochen Gerz’s invisible monument, Mahnmahl gegen Rassismus-2146 steine, (Monument against Racism-2146 stones) or Horst Hoheisel’s Aschrottbrunnen in Kassel which similarly deployed disappearance and invisibility as their presiding metaphors15 (Figs 12 and 13). The Missing House, however, is somewhat
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Fig. 13. Horst Hoheisel, Aschrottbrunnen (courtesy of the artist).


singular among Boltanski’s installations insofar as it represents a public, permanent, and site specific commission. Situated where it is, in the rapidly transforming Eastern section of Berlin, one wonders how such a laconic installation might participate in the ongoing German project of coming to terms with the the past in the new context of unification, a project charged with ambivalence, difficulty, and controversy. Neither monument nor counter-monument, commemorative only of absence, The Missing House leaves unexamined the whys and wherefores of its own mute testimonial. Accordingly, and notwithstanding what other responses it might prompt, it cannot be considered adequate to do the work of mourning. This, as Freud argued, requires acknowledgment of the irrevocable loss of the object precisely in its specific and singular identity. It follows that the work of mourning can never be generic, but only accomplished through the conscious recognition of the singularity and irreplaceability of what has been lost. In this, the successful work of mourning represents the triumph of the reality principle. In melancholia, or so Freud argued, that which is lost is not abandoned; the grieving subject entombs the object within, neither relinquishing nor separating from it. ‘In grief, the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.’16 In Freud’s model, the three conditioning factors in melancholia are the loss of the object, ambivalence, and
the regression of libido into the ego. Unlike mourning, melancholia is indeed characterized by ambivalence, by internal conflicts related to the subject’s investments in the lost object itself. But Freud remarks too that the melancholic may not even fully understand the nature of his loss: ‘In yet other cases one feels justified in concluding that a loss of the kind [as in mourning] has been experienced, but one cannot see clearly what has been lost, and may the more readily suppose that the patient too cannot consciously perceive what it is he has lost. This, indeed, might be so even when the patient was aware of the loss giving rise to the melancholia, that is, when he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in them.’

Perhaps it is this inability to fully acknowledge the ‘what’ in all its historical density, rather than the immediate ‘whom’ — the bombed out tenants of 15/16 Hamburgerstrasse — that disqualifies *The Missing House* from functioning as a site of mourning. For if *The Missing House* invites the passerby to some kind of meditation, some somber contemplation of its significance as relic, ruin and absence, it does so at the cost of banishing its own historical legacy.