

# MODERN ART OXFORD

## CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

### INVENTORY OF OBJECTS BELONGING TO A YOUNG MAN OF OXFORD

20 DECEMBER 2014 - 22 FEBRUARY 2015

'The *Inventories* say nothing about anyone. Their only interest is that anyone who looks at them sees his or her own portrait in them.' Boltanski, 2007.

In January 1973, Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) sent 62 handwritten letters to museums of art, history and anthropology around the world. He proposed an unusual exhibition in which the objects belonging to a recently deceased individual would be assembled, classified and displayed according to the museum's normal protocols within one of its galleries. The person in question was not to be a member of the art world, but a 'typical' resident of the local city. The Museum of Modern Art Oxford's director at the time, Peter Ibsen, was among the few who agreed to undertake the project.

Following the artist's precise instructions, Ibsen selected a male undergraduate from Christ Church College and painstakingly photographed the hundreds of quotidian items that surrounded him, from socks and a packet of laundry liquid to a rosary. Boltanski arrived in Oxford two days before the opening to finalise the display and the exhibition was almost entirely organised by letter. The correspondence, drawn from MAO's archive, documents the process through which *Inventory of the Objects Belonging to a Young Man of Oxford* was jointly created.

From 1973-74, five different *Inventories* were assembled and displayed at the Staatliche Kunsthalle (Baden-Baden, Germany), Israel Museum (Jerusalem), Louisiana Museum (Denmark) and Centre National d'Art Contemporain (Paris), as well as Oxford. These exhibitions shared a common root not only in Boltanski's proposal, but also through the exhibition catalogues, each of which reproduced the objects in miniaturised, postage-stamp format above handwritten inscriptions. Oxford's exhibition catalogue, the handmade proof of which Boltanski posted to Ibsen and which is displayed here, collects and labels not the work at hand but another work, *List of Exhibits Belonging to a Woman of Baden-Baden Followed by an Explanatory Note*. This illustrates the circulatory and transnational character of the project, inviting comparative reflection on the cities, museums and persons thus represented.

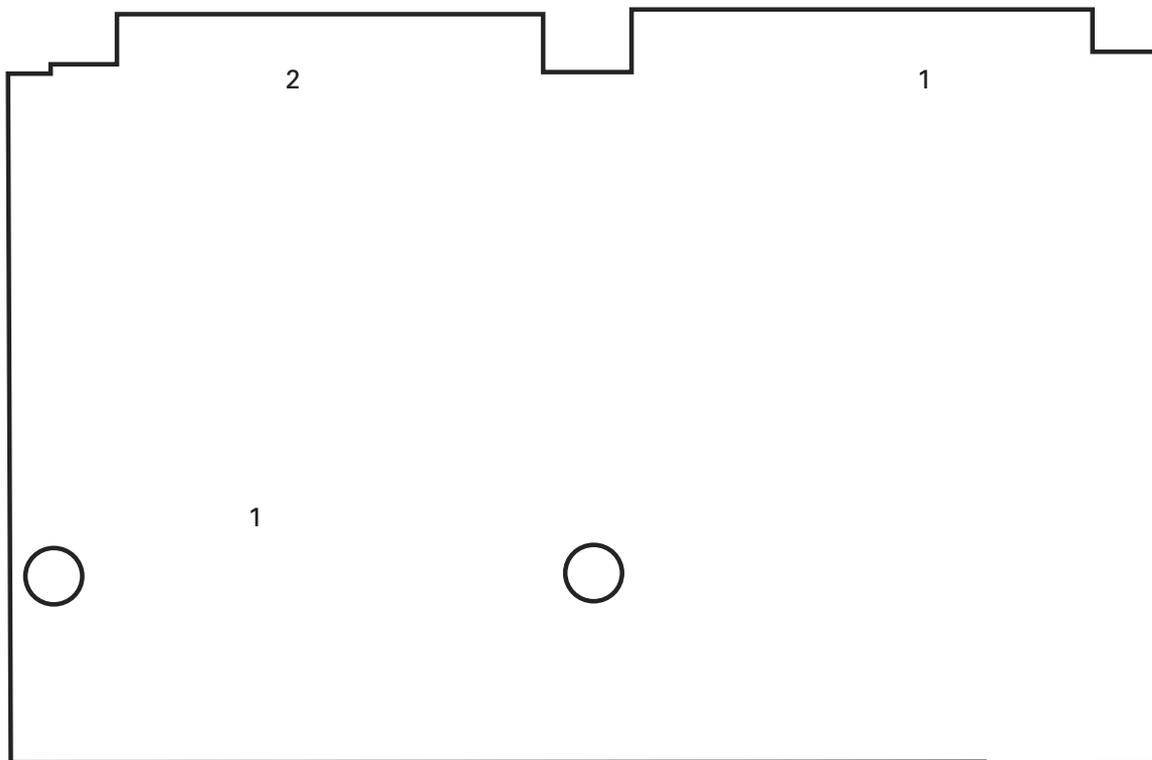
Oxford's *Inventory* is the only one of the series to present photographic documentation rather than the original possessions within the gallery. Whether or not the choice was made for practical reasons, the results form part of Boltanski's sustained investigation of the melancholic nature of photography, exploring the medium's dual qualities of naturalistic immediacy and deathly stillness, presence and absence. Although only the Baden-Baden *Inventory* ended up enshrining the belongings of someone recently deceased (as Boltanski had originally proposed) a spectral mood prevails.

The compilation format of the *Inventory* relates closely to Boltanski's 1969 *Search for and Presentation of Everything Remaining from My Childhood 1944-50*, a nine-page photocopied book featuring still-life photographs of unexceptional objects which he distributed by post. It also echoes *Photo Album of the Family D., 1939-1964*, a series of 150 photographs from an unnamed family displayed at *Documenta 5*, 1972 in a grid format. These photographs, which eschew aesthetic appeal in the tradition of conceptual art practice, seem nonetheless charged with a mysterious significance when brought together. If these works serve as 'inverted portraiture,' as Boltanski suggests, how much of the identities of these forgotten individuals may be discerned either by their local contemporaries in the 1970s, or now after more than four decades?

*Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Young Man of Oxford* is part of a series of exhibitions at Modern Art Oxford that revisit moments from the gallery's history in the lead up to its 50th anniversary in 2016. For details of other exhibitions in this series visit [modernartoxford.org.uk/archive](http://modernartoxford.org.uk/archive)

Christian Boltanski's attempt to build an image of a person by gathering their belongings immediately brings to mind the painstaking accumulation by Warhol of personal artefacts in his so-called "time capsules". In *Love Is Enough*, Jeremy Deller explores the lives and work of both Warhol and Morris through the objects, images and papers they collected and produced, similarly building a portrait through the accumulation of personal objects and artefacts.

Modern Art Oxford is grateful to Antoinette Ibsen for kindly donating the original proof of Christian Boltanski's *Inventory of the Objects Belonging to a Young Man of Oxford* to the gallery.



1. Christian Boltanski  
*Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Young Man of Oxford*  
200 black and white photographs  
Arranged in two grids; 192 x 360 cm and 192 x 390 cm  
Each 24 x 30 cm  
1973  
*Courtesy CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux*
2. Letter from Christian Boltanski to the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 6 January 1973  
Letter from Christian Boltanski to Peter Ibsen, 22 April 1973  
Letter from Peter Ibsen to Christian Boltanski, 3 May 1973  
Letter from Christian Boltanski to Peter Ibsen, 11 May 1973  
Letter from Peter Ibsen to Christian Boltanski, 15 May 1973  
Letter from Christian Boltanski to Peter Ibsen, 19 May 1973  
Letter from Christian Boltanski to Peter Ibsen, 4 June 1973  
Letter from Peter Ibsen to Christian Boltanski, 27 June 1973  
Christian Boltanski, original proof for Museum of Modern Art Oxford catalogue, 1973

## CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI ASSOCIATED EVENTS

### Talk: Boltanski and the Portrait

Thursday 22 January, 7pm

Hanneke Grootenboer and Hilary Floe discuss Boltanski's exhibition and wider work focusing on ideas of identity, portraiture and the archive.

Hanneke Grootenboer is Professor in the History of Art, University of Oxford. Hilary Floe is Associate Curator at Modern Art Oxford.



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