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### Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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We, too, are in search of our parents. Christian Boltanski

Since one cannot thrive on memories, on a relationship with projections, what keeps alive the hope of wholeness is an interchange of love, longing, frustration, and anger in the vicissitudes of a real relationship. Annie G. Rogers

In the Introduction I invited you to participate in a potential space in order to prepare you for the relational aspect of (inter)subjectivity and, consequently, for the enabling function of a responsive reader. While providing (inter)subjectivity with a place of semiotic interaction, the notion of potential space also enabled me to explain traumatized subjectivity in terms of the loss of subject-constituting and meaning-producing relations with the environment. My aim was to draw your attention to the notion of traumatic pain – as manifestation of an absent potential space – and to make you vulnerable to figurations of that pain. As I have argued, traces of this pain emerge if we are willing and able to notice them. They refer to the violence-cum-agony-induced silences with which traumatized subjects are confronted.

By foregrounding the affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity I argued that both failure of affect regulation and lack of adequate representational means contribute to the trauma or breach that disintegrates (inter)subjectivity. The attention to the affective genesis established the relevance of empathic imagination for the understanding of traumatized subjectivity. The awareness of this embodied thinking is substantially indebted to what art and literature, in spite of themselves, reveal. Therefore, my practice of cultural analysis serves to highlight the mutual relationship between affecting, imaginative and thought-provoking semiotic objects and a subject of interpretation who can integrate feeling, imagination, and (self-)reflection in her acts of interpretation. I was motivated by the hope that transpersonal encounters with traumatized subjectivity, encounters mediated by cultural objects that carry traces of traumatic pain, might be socially productive. By making real interpreters more open to the silenced presence of real traumatic pain, a social context can emerge in which silenced pain can be heard.

As in the invitation, a work of Boltanski will guide my goodbye remarks. Whereas his inward-structured *Boîte d'épingles* helped me to make visible the relevance of embodied imagination and figuration, some parts of his multiple and multimedial installation *Diese Kinder Suchen Ihre Eltern* (*Children in Search of Their Parents*) in Cologne (1993-1994), in combination with one of his later texts, help me to send you on your way to participate in such a trace-reading world.

Boltanski not only works with social sites but also stresses the historical specificity of his space-oriented productions by explicitly presenting them as art "after" the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Hence, his work also stimulates reflection about a trauma-organized culture, addressing entire generations that have to cope with past and present genocides and with the ongoing threat of destructive, human-induced – interpersonal or intergroup – violence. While problematizing traditional views of history, Boltanski creates sites for making other histories: he uses socially accepted platforms where history can "happen" from within encounters in the present. I will argue, then, that *Children in Search of Their Parents* proposes to approach cultural memory as an alternative conception of history, namely history seen as a social construction of the past that emphatically takes place in the present and between people. Seen as such, cultural memory is a discursive activity that is realized by and realizes living persons who are willing to become involved in some shared future life.

Passengers who visited Cologne railway station between 28 November 1993 and 28 January 1994 were handed leaflets bearing photographs of children (cf. figures on pages 26, 120, 154-155, and 254). The text on the leaflet stated that the subjects of these photographs were German children who had lost their parents during the Second World War. Why were passengers put face to face with these children? The answer was given on the back of the leaflet: "If you recognize yourself, or if you know who these children are, please write to Christian Boltanski."

Because the text addresses its reader directly as "you," this reader becomes involved in the search for recognition. At the moment of reading you – we – realize that the potential lives of the children depend on our confirmation of their existence. Only our act of recognition in the here and now can give these identity photos their concrete referents, living or dead. Hence, our engagement with these photographs can make a lot of difference. This active and collective appeal

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1. See, for instance, an interview with Doris von Drahten in Hemken 1996: 237. Boltanski's view of art is explained by Van Alphen 1997.

for involvement appears to be a general aspect of Boltanski's Cologne project – and not only of this one – because he makes use of sites where many people can be reached: Boltanski apparently aims at exploiting the meeting and exchange potential of both communal places (chapel, museum) and public information channels (Internet, book). As a result of this emphasis on public connections and encounters, Boltanski's art is, above all, a form of address to the social function of readers and viewers; they are addressed as members of a group or community.

But what does the address imply? For what exactly the addressee is needed? The book that accompanied the Cologne project, in which most of the photographs of the German children appear, makes it possible to answer this question. The cover of the book bears a large red cross. This cross designates that the children were photographed by the Red Cross in order to be identified and possibly reunited with their parents. The texts below the pictures consist of information about the children that was available at the moment they were taken under the care of the organization. In contrast to the blurred and death's-head photographs in other installations by Boltanski, these Red Cross photographs do not exclude the possibility of recognition. Although their quality is poor and the words "unknown" and "probably" occur frequently, the persons in these photos are identifiable in principle.

The book starts with a short introduction in three languages (French, German, and English) with Boltanski's name underneath each version. The first version is in French, Boltanski's mother tongue, and is entitled *Ces enfants cherchent leurs parents* (demonstrative pronoun included). However, the rest of the text problematizes the obvious conclusion that the title refers to the German children. I quote the English version:

#### Children in Search of Their Parents

In devastated post-war Germany, thousands of children were left displaced or homeless. They did not know how to find their parents, and in some cases did not even know their own name or age. The Red Cross took up their cause, and printed posters with their photographs and information on special characteristics in an attempt to find a family for them again. Now fifty years have passed, and when I look at the faces of these *lost children* I find myself trying to imagine what has become of them. They have become part of the post-war history of Germany with all its changes. Has fate brought them happy or unhappy lives, made them rich or poor? I should like to find them again. They are about my own age, and *their history is similar in some ways to mine, to ours. We, too, are in search of our parents.* (?; emphasis added)

Christian Boltanski

By the omission of “these” the English text explicitly refers to children in general. Thus only the version in the language that has become the international *lingua franca* starts with a pointer that prepares the reader for the conclusion in the last sentence: “We, too, are in search of our parents.” That is, not only particular children, “these German children,” but all of us, at least those of us who are about the same age, are searching. Moreover, the intervention of the Red Cross is described as “an attempt to find a family for them again.” The conspicuous use of the indefinite article (in all versions) indicates that not only their specific family but any family will do for “these lost children.” Paradoxically, the search is not aimed at strengthening family ties of a specific person; instead the concept of family itself is ultimately broadened to encompass all contemporaneous “we.”

Consequently, the looking for “our parents” cannot be interpreted as a search for real parents, because most people know who and where their parents are. Still “we” are supposed to be looking for them. This suggests that what is being referred to is not personal family life linked to personal history, but rather a more general family life linked to a public history. “Parents” become, first of all, persons who form a connection with a past; they provide people with a historical plot by accounting for the beginning of that history. If “we” are “lost children,” it is precisely that connection that has become problematic. Boltanski thus problematizes the idea of the chronological historical plot that starts in the past – with an origin – and leads to the present – the effect. At the same time, however, a common search for a relationship that resembles the dependence of children on their parents is brought up: “We, too, are in search of our parents.”

The “we” of this last sentence is, again, a form of address because it includes the readers of the book. Here, Boltanski’s text is directed to an inclusive we, simultaneously indicating in subtle ways that we have different culturally and historically defined positions in the present. To start with, we are addressed in three languages, which implies that there is no self-evident understanding between people who speak different languages. Translation is necessary. Further Boltanski demonstrates that translation is not simply a linguistic exchange, but a matter of semiosis and interpretation: the German and English versions of the text slightly differ both from the French text and from each other. Bringing historical differences to light by means of misinterpretations or mistranslations, Boltanski thus emphasizes the relation between history, narration, and interpretation.

For example, the second to last sentence in French reads: “Ils ont à peu près mon âge et leur histoire est aussi la mienne, la nôtre.” This could be literally translated as: “They are about my own age, and their history is also mine, ours.” But the English text reads: “They are about my own

age, and their history is similar in some ways to mine, to ours." This sentence thus stresses that the history concerned is not alike in its entirety, but only in some ways. The German text goes even further in its differentiation: there the (German) history is only "ein wenig" (a little bit) similar. Despite these differences, however, the three texts address a collective "we" at the end. This joining of all of us implies that the German children Boltanski refers to can be interpreted as also standing for "we": being children of different national histories, we all have to deal with a past that is marked by the Holocaust. Including us – the readers – in a history of lost children, Boltanski makes it apparent to us readers that we are collectively burdened with a past that defies understanding. We, too, are confronted with a definite breach in history.

Presenting this impossible history as a search for parents – the parameters of a personal past – Boltanski blurs the borderline between individual and general history. Because individual history depends on autobiographical memory, Boltanski draws an analogy between personal and collective memory, a comparison that underscores the intertwinement of (inter)subjectivity and (auto)history. By making both the living subject of history and the narrative organization of history visible, Boltanski's text proposes that history can be approached in terms of cultural memory. It is the subject-forming aspect of the process that explains why the problems of history-after-Holocaust are best understood in terms of cultural memory.

For the argument of this study it is most relevant that through the approach of history in terms of cultural memory an affectively defined narrating comes to the fore, because remembering is a practice that depends on acts of interpretation from within and in the service of present interests. Moreover, although these acts of memory need intersubjective ratification, they are manifested in the living subject who is involved in that process, that is, in acts of memory in which actual recollections and what can be claimed to be remembered are intertwined. Cultural memory, then, implies an affectively invested practice, which simultaneously gives subjects a voice in what is memorable history and explicitly places that empowering moment in the present time of the subject of memory.

Due to this embodied and present aspect of making history, Boltanski's "lost children" need not only refer to the impossibility of history; because they – we – live in the here and now, the possibility of making connections from within the present is not excluded. This suggestion is implied in Boltanski's emphasis on the vital relationship with parents, because this relationship foregrounds what I have called the specific aspect of the capacity to relate. By means of his focus on a search for parents Boltanski hints at the precondition for recounting and, consequently, at the

discursive border area situated in between enabling relationships and “telling about from within.” The text contains the possibility of a potential space and enhances the conclusion that it is the space where the willingness to become involved in a personal relationship – emotional availability and competence – creates the possibility to produce new meaning.

It is noteworthy that the reference to familial relationships points out that a facilitating environment cannot come into being without concrete interpersonal interactions. In this view, handing out leaflets in Cologne, i.e. attempting to provide lost children with a family again, makes clear that, despite cultural and historical differences, a holding listener is the most appropriate answer for being lost. Hence, the address implied in the leaflets should be understood as an appeal for responsive listening, inviting the train passengers of Cologne to facilitate the coming into being of a potential space through personal involvement. At the same time, Boltanski’s use of concrete places in Cologne suggests that the potential space does not function in a vacuum. His work emphasizes that his art needs the interaction with the social sites in which he presented it.

Because a railway station is characterized by departures and arrivals, it is no coincidence that Boltanski chose this platform to actively confront people with the problem of “being lost.” Moreover, the particular Holocaust effect of trains, and especially that of a station in Germany, turns this site into an emblem of a historical trauma that defies being simplified in terms of departure from the past and arrival in the present.<sup>2</sup> For post-Holocaust generations in general departure connotes disconnection from traditional views of subjectivity-in-relation-to-history, whereas arrival points to the possibility of making new connections. Hence, the two-directional character of this specific social site underscores that the realization of a traumatic “loss” does not necessarily inhibit the potential to start anew, although others than traumatized people are needed to make that start happen. As space of transition and change of direction this platform reveals its inherent semiotic potential

Nevertheless, the leaflets handed out on the railway platform would not have had the same impact, had they not been part of a plural art manifestation made by a famous artist. Therefore, it is particularly remarkable that Boltanski does not give preference to the museum, the generally

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2. The term “Holocaust effect” is introduced by Van Alphen in his study *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (1997).

accepted platform for the presentation of art. On the contrary, he dislikes the museum as the location to “make a collage with reality” as he formulates it:

It is very important for an artist to know where he is working. When I am making a book, I am making a book. When I am working in a church, *I have to realize where I am.* (...) I am making a kind of collage with reality (...): a collage with a church. When I work in a museum, it is more difficult, because a museum is *nowhere*; most of the museums are only white boxes. (...) In the museum there is the absence of atmosphere and the terror of stigmatizing. (...) People must arrive and say, “I don’t know what it is, but something happens.” From the moment you can put a name on it, it is definitely over. (1997: 13; emphasis added)

In this fragment Boltanski mentions the three social institutions he uses most frequently: the book, the church, and the museum. By equating his books with his installations on location he draws attention to the fact that not his art as such but its working is important, that is, its function in relation to some social practice through which people’s real lives are structured. As he formulates it in the same publication: “If the work is in real life, it moves more easily” (13). The aim of presenting art thus is “moving people,” an activity implying that the production of meaning is a process in which meaning starts as an interaction that affects.

Because something can “happen” even if one “does not know what it is,” a layered process is indicated, in which sensations, feelings, or other bodily (re)actions predate reflective knowing. Significantly, the performative aspect of the production of meaning – meaning as effect of an interaction – seems to give more creative latitude than conceptual, constative content, for by “putting a name” the process “is definitely over.” Although, semiotically, it is precisely naming that makes conscious sharing of meaning possible, Boltanski’s latter observation leaves no doubt that producing meaning in the form of restrictive labeling obstructs the happening of creative events.

Such an obstruction seems to hamper the work with museums; Boltanski uses the word “stigmatizing” to qualify its atmosphere. He explains that in comparison to other social sites the work in museums “is more difficult because a museum is nowhere; most of the museums are only white boxes”. This “being nowhere” of a museum makes sense in the frame of the traditional conception of art as product of an autonomous practice that presents itself as functioning outside or at a distance from real life. Boltanski underlines the asocial or neutral character of museums by calling them “white boxes,” and this colorless quality of the museum indicates more than its

appearance of whiteness: "there is the absence of atmosphere and the terror of stigmatizing" (13). Fixing the idea of art by connecting it to a place of "nowhere" thus makes it impossible that something can "happen." In short, people are not moved in a museum.

Through his aversion to museums – "I prefer working outside the museum" – Boltanski demonstrates that in his works not only traditional history is problematized; he also clarifies that the museum is not the right social platform to make the connections with people that are necessary for making cultural memory. It thus is first and foremost the absence of social relevance that prevents art from taking part in the lived experience of people. The established ideas about art are the obstacle: "If the concept of art would be left out, something real could happen, something related to human existence" (13).

Hence my conclusion that in order to move people, make things happen, create meaningful events, give traumatized people the opportunity to become integrated and socially connected people again, not art as such matters, but its connection with real listeners, who live in a social "somewhere." This brings me back to the specific listener at stake in the present study, i.e. the cultural analyst and her involvement in transpersonal encounters with traumatized subjects. The return to this listener suggests that she, too, plays – should play – her part in an environment where she can make her increased sensitivity to traumatic pain productive.