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ART

Exploring Mortality With Clothes and a Claw

BY DOROTHY SPEARS

“No Man's Land,” a work by the French artist Christian Boltanski, being installed at the Park Avenue Armory. The project uses 30 tons of used clothing and 3,000 stacked cookie tins.

At first sight, the monumental artwork being installed at the Park Avenue Armory suggests nothing so much as a crane claw, the frustrating arcade game in which a player tries to pull a stuffed animal from a pile of many, and to hold on to it, with a grapple controlled by a joystick.

And even after spending time with its creator, the French artist Christian Boltanski, and hearing his take on the piece's emotional and psychic meanings, it's hard not to see it as a version of that childhood game, and as an embodiment of a similar, albeit more intense, kind of perplexity and heartbreak.

The work, “No Man's Land,” which opens to the public on Friday and runs through June 13, is centered on a five-story crane and a 25-foot-high mound of salvaged clothing rising from the floor of the Armory's vast drill hall. Every few minutes, in an act meant to resonate with the arbitrariness of death and survival, the crane's giant claw will pluck a random assortment of shirts, pants and dresses from the mound then release them to flap back down haphazardly. Visitors can watch the action — set to a ceaseless, reverberating soundtrack of thousands of human heartbeats — from ground level, standing amid dozens of 15-by-23-foot plots of discarded jackets that extend in all directions from the mound and that may evoke refugee or death camps. Behind the visitors, a 66-foot-long, 12-foot-high wall made from 3,000 stacked cookie tins will cut off views of the exit.

A reprise of an installation called “Personnes” that was shown at the Grand Palais in Paris in January, “No Man's Land,” which was commissioned by the Armory, aims to inspire questions like “Why did my mother die?” and “Why am I still here?” Its large-scale exercise in futility ultimately points to a single fact, Mr. Boltanski suggested during a recent tour of the drill hall. “You can hold onto the clothes, and even the heartbeats of many, many people,” he said. “But you can't keep anybody.”

Still, holding onto heartbeats is something, and “No Man's Land” also includes an ersatz doctor's office in a room off the hall, in which visitors will be able to record and register their own heartbeats, adding them to the roughly 40,000 already recorded in related Boltanski projects worldwide. There is even a permanent archive — “Les Archives du Coeur” — being built on an island in Japan by a museum foundation there.

Mr. Boltanski seems attracted to even the most ethereal traces of lives lived. “No Man's Land” will differ from its predecessor in Paris in at least two regards, he noted. Given the season, the Armory will be much warmer than the unheated Grand Palais in January. “And with 30 tons of used clothes” trucked in from a textile recycling plant in New Jersey, he added approvingly, “you are going to have some smell.”

At 65, Mr. Boltanski has spent a career producing vivid reminders of life's inevitable passing. His engagement with both death and survival has drawn glowing comparisons to the poetry of John Keats, and also been denounced — particularly when his fascination with the Holocaust is most evident — as pornographic and exploitive.

But during an interview over lunch at an uptown Manhattan bistro, he had a serenely unworldly air, somewhat reminiscent of the Peter Sellers character Chance the Gardener.

“What makes me very happy in my life is that I have enough money until I die,” he said, taking a healthy swig of red wine. Referring to the recent announcement that he would represent France in the 2011 Venice Biennale, he added: “I don't need money, and I don't need glory. And for this reason I'm really free.”

Asked what he intended to do with this freedom, Mr. Boltanski was quiet. “I want

to try to understand," he said finally.

The third son of a Catholic Corsican mother and a father descended from Ukrainian Jews, Mr. Boltanski has a lot in his background to make sense of. In 1943 his parents, living in occupied Paris, faked an argument and pretended that his father had abandoned the family. For more than a year after that, according to Mr. Boltanski, his father was kept hidden under floorboards in the family's apartment. Mr. Boltanski was conceived during one of his father's rare forays out of hiding. His mother went into labor in September 1944, just after the liberation of Paris. But with violence continuing in the streets, he said, his father remained under the floor, so his adolescent brother, Jean-Elie, delivered the baby at home. "He was the man of the house," Mr. Boltanski said of his brother.

The artist Christian Boltanski.

After the war, he said, his parents' closest friends — all survivors of the camps — told stories that would forever loom large in his imagination. "At the beginning of the life of an artist," he said, "there is often a trauma, and for me the trauma was hearing always that everything was very dangerous."

His father, a doctor, would eventually return to the hospital where he had worked. Unable to go anywhere alone, however, his father required his wife and Christian to wait for him nearby in the family's car until his shift ended.

Mr. Boltanski, too, was fearful of the outside world. He found school unbearable and refused to go, he said, spending his youth watching television, playing with toy soldiers and gazing out of the apartment window at the street below. "I was in love with a little girl," he recalled. "I never spoke to her. But I saw her every day."

Although he would not venture outside alone until he was 18, he insisted he never felt trapped. "I didn't want to go out — I was very happy," he said. When he was 13, Mr. Boltanski began making paintings based on images of massacres found in religious books he received as gifts for his first Communion. Later, as a young man, he made emotionally fraught installations with oversized dolls. His mature work, however, he traces to 1969, when he published a small book, "Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood: 1944-1950."

In 1970, his displays of what he called "stupidly cruel instruments of torture"— razor blades, small knives, pins, improvised surgical tools — were exhibited at the Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Ileana Sonnabend, the renowned New York and Paris art dealer, bought all his work in the show and began to represent him. Her endorsement, along with that of his subsequent dealer in both cities, Marian Goodman, would ensure Mr. Boltanski's ongoing exposure in museums and galleries across Europe and the United States. His provocative sculptures and installations now sell for as much as $190,000.

Decades after he began his explorations of mortality, Mr. Boltanski now finds himself confronting his own more directly than ever before, and increasingly looking to his art not only for a way into it, but also for a way around. "The only way to fight dying is through legacy," he said with conviction.

David Walsh, an Australian art collector who is also a professional gambler, has provided him with a chance to create another kind of legacy. For a project called "The Life of C.B.," Mr. Walsh recently commissioned the artist to install a video camera in his studio near Paris, which is already recording Mr. Boltanski's working life and will eventually transmit a live 24-hour feed of it to a small waterfront enclosure at the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, founded by Mr. Walsh and scheduled to open in 2011.

Under the terms of the agreement, Mr. Walsh will pay a monthly stipend of about $2,500 to Mr. Boltanski until the artist dies. "It's not as silly as it sounds," said Mr. Walsh, speaking by phone from his apartment in Sydney. "I get a work of art by an otherwise expensive artist I admire." And the longer Mr. Boltanski lives, he reasoned, the more artwork will be created.

Mr. Boltanski disagreed. Referring to Mr. Walsh as "the Devil," he accused his patron of gambling on his projected death. After all, the sooner he dies, the less the work will cost.

"He's calling it a bet," countered Mr. Walsh. "He likes to create a sense of immediacy about his death since he's so afraid of it."

"Of course," Mr. Walsh added, referring to the value of the work, "It would be absolutely great if he died in his studio. But I don't think it's ethical to organize it."