

# Contemporary artwork: comparison and analysis



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The two pieces which I have selected for comparison use similar technique to encourage an entirely different outcome and audience response. It is the way in which these artists go about their creative process, and how this, in turn provokes such contrasting concepts, with such similar mediums that engages me. The first piece for comparison is the “haunting photographic installation” (Fakray, 2009) “Les Suisses Morts” By Christian Boltanski, 1990, to be compared and contrasted with the fashion/art photographic editorial “Hold on to your hat” by photographer Stacey Mark, 2009, consisting of five components. Similarly the work of Boltanski consists of multiple photographs in order to enhance narrative. The most significant parallel between the two pieces (other than choice of medium) lies in the soft focus aesthetic of the photographs in question, which creates the illusion of the subjects fading into and out of the work, in turn evoking feelings and introducing notions of presence and absence within the work (Roca and Sterling, 2007). Both works appear to have strong associations with Phantasmagoria (Roca and Sterling, 2007), the illusion of constant alterations in light and colour encouraging a dreamlike state involving the fusion of reality with the imagination (Gunning, no date). The overall effect for both pieces is somewhat visionary, yet they conjure up quite contrasting emotion within their audience. In this essay I will be identifying the conscious artistic choices which have been made in order to make the work similar yet so dissimilar at once.

“Hold onto your hat” by Stacey Mark is effectively a fashion photographic editorial which has been executed artistically in order to transport the onlooker into a whimsical dream world. Featuring a young woman, the work

is “ very sensuous and moody” (McGrath, 2009), and with this in mind, has been designed to sell, promote and bring back the boater hat, an object of the past. (The past is just one of the themes dealt with in each piece, as Boltanski brings back from the past haunting memories of the deceased (Fakray, 2009), into the present, enabling them to live on). There is, therefore, a central focus to the work, which every artistic decision relates back to in order to create a strong cohesive narrative for the editorial spread consisting of five separate photographs. Whilst the eventual aim of this piece is to sell to an audience, the work of Boltanski endeavors to have an entirely different effect upon its audience through visual disruption and “ intense” emotional impact (Feinstein, 1997).

Christian Boltanski is heavily involved in the devastation and loss of life which took place during the Second World War and the Holocaust, a complete contrast in subject matter to Mark’s photography. The emotional power of Boltanski’s work derives from the mental ties that the audience relates when in the presence of his installations. His photographic installations featuring portraits of the deceased that were published in the obituary of a Swiss newspaper are particularly powerful, perhaps disturbing to the audience in their suggestion of the Holocaust (Simon, 2003). Boltanski appropriates his source material in the creation of his haunting archival installation consisting of vast collections of photographs (Fakray, 2009). Contrastingly, although with the use of the same medium to express her ideas, Stacey Mark takes her photographs, beginning with an empty film and following her work through to the end using only the products of her creative efforts. This is not to say that the work of Boltanski is any less evocative, in

fact perhaps the creative process in which he immerses himself, renders the outcome all the more meaningful, with greater impact than what may have been if he had of produced his source material himself (Fakray, 2009).

Lighting is an element which is used very differently and carefully within these two pieces to evoke contrasting feelings within the audience. In “Les Suisses Morts” Boltanski lights his subject from above, in turn creating a strong “sense of interrogation” (artline, no date) where the eyes of the photographic subjects fall into deep sinister shadows. The image appropriation combined with the applied lighting technique lends each portrait a “Shadowy skeletal form” and “Semi obliterated face,” (Caines, 2004) thus having a powerfully haunting effect upon the audience. Adversely the lighting adopted in the photography of Stacey Mark enhances the luminosity that diffuses from the work, having quite the opposite effect on its audience. Bright yet soft light seems to diffuse gently onto the subject of these photographs, giving the images a dream like and visionary effect, perhaps achieved through the use of back lighting as well as forward facing studio lights. With this lighting “Hold onto your hat” achieves a sense of serenity as well as purity and femininity, all feelings that are helping to sell this product through appealing to the audience.

Mark’s use of such lighting lends a soft focus and pictorial aesthetic to the work whilst Boltanski achieves a similarly pictorial effect (Franzke, 2009) with an entirely different approach. “Les Suisses Morts” assembles old photographic portraits of the deceased Swiss appropriated from newspapers, which have been re-photographed and enlarged by Boltanski, rendering them slightly larger than life for maximum audience impact (Vetrocq, 2008).

<https://assignbuster.com/contemporary-artwork-comparison-and-analysis/>

Boltanski takes care to enlarge to enhance audience response rather than to distort “ for the sake of realism,” yet he still attains a soft focus, slightly blurred and vague aesthetic as a result of this augmentation which is “ characteristic” of his work as it works to encourage notions of absence and presence, (Simon, 2003.)

This alternative method of working generates stronger references to “ childhood, innocence, death and memory,” (all central themes explored in his work), as a result of Boltanski’s use of real portraits, each with their own story to tell (Hylton, 1995.) Boltanski aims to subvert his audience and provoke deep feelings of melancholy, both of which he is able to significantly enhance upon with the use of real life portrait appropriation, (Simon, 2003.) Such realism within the work inflicts a “ dense emotional impact” upon the audience as Boltanski touches upon notions of death as well as the disintegration of memories over time, which in turn induces a sense of nostalgia amongst the viewers, longing for lost loved ones and their own childhood (Caines, 2004.) In a similar, though more light hearted way, “ Hold onto your hat” by Stacey Mark “ has the audience feeling nostalgic” for their childhood and the days of dressing up (fashion gone rogue, no date).

Though his message is powerful, Boltanski objectifies and dehumanizes his photographic subjects in various ways. The many faces comprising his archival installation are anonymous to the audience; they are unknown faces which Boltanski arranges to be read as whole, rather than paying attention to the individual. “ A Photograph captures a moment in time...by its very nature it implies selection and priority,” and each portrait reflects a snapshot second of an entire life (Caines, 2004). At first the audience feel

oppressed by the vast numbers of deceased faces towering over as a result of Boltanski's dehumanization " reminding us of the absurdity of death," however the work then begins to forward the concept of memory, which seems to counteract some of the ramifications of death, as the audience begin to identify with the individual, (Fakray, 2009.) In this way, both pieces appear to promote. Whilst Boltanski promotes a concept and an idea, Stacey Mark uses artistic and creative efforts to promote a product and to sell, and it is in this way that Mark objectifies and dehumanizes his photographic subject. Mark uses the girl as an object through which to sell a product meaning the girl herself is a selling point as she compliments the boater hat, and vice versa. The beautiful accessory, on the young girl, with the carefully lit back drop, soft focus effect and expression of serenity all help to create a cohesive and strong narrative with a sense of beauty and innocence (McGrath, 2009) through which to sell a product. Innocence is a feeling felt in both pieces of work, particularly in the sense of vulnerability and helplessness which Boltanski achieves in his installation, (Hylton, 1995.)

It has been interesting to explore two contemporary art pieces which have such different functions yet remain correspondent in several ways, as well as the contrasting creative processes that these entail. The most engaging way in which they differ and compare at the same time lies in the contrasting lighting techniques which both seem to bring about notions of absence and presence, yet conjure up opposing feelings and emotions within the audience with different aims. Through the investigation of the photographic medium used in installation as a fine art practise and in fashion as an editorial

through which to sell, I have been encouraged to focus on meaning behind work, and more contemporary ways of working.

Word count: 1, 478