

The Review

Exhibition review

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI — CHANCE

French Pavilion of the 54th International Art Exhibition, Venice.

Does the biggest gamble in our lives occur before we are even born? Artist Christian Boltanski has long been haunted by the mysteries of birth and by the odd feeling that if his parents had conceived him a few seconds sooner he could have been someone else. A recent work, *Chance*, in the French Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale explored this issue.

In the main gallery a long strip of photographs of newborn infants flies across the room as if on a newspaper press. From time to time a bell rings, the strip stops and one of the babies is singled out, its face projected on to a screen. Why has this baby been chosen? What does the future hold for it? All the faces seem similar, but all will have very different futures.

Born in Paris in 1944, Boltanski always felt that he had survived the war by chance. His 1990 piece *Missing House* concerned a bomb site in Berlin where a building was completely destroyed, leaving those on either side untouched. He felt this illustrated the random nature of life; why some



Christian Boltanski

neighbours were killed and others saved. Was it the will of some higher power, or just a matter of chance?

Back in Venice, Boltanski's work made me think about the role of 'chance' and the patients I have come across in general practice. So much of their future often seems to be ordained before they are born. Prenatal research tells us that future cardiac health is related to the mothers diet in pregnancy, and the social situation you are born into, with its support mechanisms, or lack of them, affecting your future life chances.

The artist further explored this in the

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adjoining galleries. Both had large, digital counters recording, on one side, the number of births in the world each day, and on the other the number of deaths. On average each day there will be 200 000 more births than deaths, a statistic that is almost incomprehensible in a gallery in Italy.

Boltanski's final 'comment' was a projection of the faces of 60 newborn Polish and 52 deceased Swiss individuals; their features cut into three parts and reassembled to form new faces. By pressing a button you can halt the constant changing images and 'create' a new human image. Once again the artist is inviting his audience to take part in the game of chance; your prize for matching the features of an existing human is a musical fanfare and a free gift from the artist.

William Norman,

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Chance at the French Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale.

