

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Anna Lovatt, "Alighiero Boetti," *Artforum*, March 2012, p. 268 – 269.

Alighiero Boetti

MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE
ARTE REINA SOFÍA, MADRID
Anna Lovatt

IN 1968, to promote his solo exhibition at Milan's Galleria de Nieubourg, Alighiero Boetti plastered a curious poster on walls across the city. It showed two men, one standing and facing the viewer and the other with his legs locked around the first man's waist, hanging upside down and facing away. This image had been appropriated from occultist Eliphas Lévi's *Histoire de la Magie* of 1860, but Boetti had superimposed his own features on the visible face. Titled *Shaman/Showman*, the poster simultaneously evoked a playing card and a tarot card, suggesting a form of game that had less to do with entertainment than with uncertainty and risk. Boetti had a famous affinity for flags, and here he came up with a heraldic representation of his own preoccupations—not only his fascination with mirroring and inversion but also his interest in the tactical deployment of gamesmanship and contingency. Taking up the latter concern as a curatorial thematic, organizers Lynne Cooke of the Reina Sofia, Mark Godfrey of Tate Modern in London, and Christian Rattemeyer of the Museum of Modern Art in New York conceived this retrospective—Boetti's largest to date—as a game of chance in its own right.

With several points of entry, an enigmatic labeling system (wall texts were clustered together some distance

from the works), and minimal didactic materials, the exhibition offered an experience that was puzzling at first. In an accompanying leaflet, the curators mapped out a "suggested itinerary" among the more than one hundred works on view, commencing with a room of sculptures produced in the mid- to late 1960s. Several of these had featured in Boetti's first solo show at Turin's Galleria Christian Stein in 1967, which utilized an assortment of banal industrial materials, including corrugated cardboard, PVC tubes, printed cloth, and electric lights, purchased from supply stores around the city. While Boetti's pragmatic deployment of such materials made him the archetypal Arte Povera artist, in later years he would locate the roots of his sculptural practice not in the industrial landscape of post-war Turin but in a series of childhood games and playful gestures. Thus he likened *Rotolo di cartone ondulato* (Roll of Corrugated Cardboard), 1966, to a coiled tape measure pushed with a finger to create a tower, and *Mazzo di tubi* (Cluster of Tubes), 1966, to a bundle of pencils balanced on end. At the Reina Sofia, these ludic architectonic structures were juxtaposed with the deadpan wordplay of Boetti's early text pieces. Two red glass-fronted boxes inscribed with the words PING and PONG were mounted on either side of a doorway, ticking incessantly as a hidden mechanism caused them to light up alternately (*Ping Pong*, 1966). The infantile, onomatopoeic words were mechanized, while the physical act of turning the head in time with the light was emphasized, making the spectator into a comic figure, a Bergsonian automaton. Viewing the work, one became acutely aware of the synchronized structure of binocular vision, as one's gaze ricocheted from side to side, unable to hold both boxes in focus at once.

In the merging of two ocular images into unitary vision, we see again Boetti's fascination with the symmetry of the body and the notion of the double. He proposed that human existence was based on a series of binary models, and during the late 1960s and early '70s elaborated this idea in a

number of self-portraits that were brought together in the exhibition. *Shaman/Showman* was displayed alongside *Strumento musicale* (Musical Instrument), 1970, a photograph of the artist holding a double-necked banjo, and *Gemelli* (Twins), 1968, the iconic photomontage in which he appears to be holding hands with his identical twin. However, for Boetti the dual, or split, subject is not locked in hermetic self-communion; instead, the individual is shown to be rooted in the collective. *Gemelli* was produced as an edition of fifty postcards mailed to friends, indicating a concern with social networks and systems of exchange that became increasingly apparent as his career progressed. Whether pinpointing the homes of acquaintances on a map of Turin in *Città di Torino* (City of Turin), 1968, or deploying the postal system to connect with far-

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flung artists, curators, dealers, and critics in *Viaggi postali* (Postal Voyages), 1969–70, Boetti pioneered an artistic practice that was fundamentally relational and dialogic.

This interest in intersubjective exchange became central to the monumental works the artist produced in collaboration with anonymous draftspeople and embroiderers from the early '70s onward. Following the suggested route at the Reina Sofia, one first encountered the shimmering, laterally expansive fields of the "Biro" drawings including *I sei sensi* (The Six Senses), 1974, and *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (Putting the World into the World), 1973–75. For these works, Boetti plotted oversize grids with the letters of the alphabet running along the side or top, and



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spelled out elliptical phrases by marking individual cells in order. For example, in *I sei sensi* the viewer sees an array of marks (commas, as it happens) distributed across the grid. The leftmost comma is in the *v* row, indicating the first letter in the encrypted text VEDÉRE GUSTARE TOCCARE DIRE ODORARE PENSARE (to see to taste to touch to say to smell to think). His assistants then hired workers to fill in the space around the commas with short, repetitive strokes of ballpoint pen—a laborious, monotonous process that resulted in incongruously lush ripples, eddies, and waves. A similarly iterative yet idiosyncratic mark had characterized Boetti's pivotal 1969 work *Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (Contest of Harmony and Invention). Disenchanted with a sculptural practice that had become "too much about the materials" and disgustingly comparing his studio to an industrial "depot," Boetti "began again from zero," tracing the prefabricated grid of a sheet of graph paper in graphite pencil. He performed this "test" twenty-five times, always following a different route across the grid. In 1974, Boetti's work was exhibited at MOMA alongside that of Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, and Dorothea Rockburne, who had variously identified drawing as a key strategy in Conceptual art. Like the work of these artists, Boetti's graph-paper "tests" demand an attentive, agile viewer, whose movement activates the intricate pattern of each grid.

The vast, hand-grained surfaces of the "Biro works" find their correlate in the expansive fields of stitches that constitute Boetti's famous "Mappe" (Maps), 1971–94, made by teams of Afghan embroiderers according to the artist's instructions. Since cultural norms in Afghanistan prevented Boetti from entering into direct dialogue with the female embroiderers, his friend Gholam Dastaghir—with whom he established his studio-*cum*-caravansary One Hotel in Kabul—conveyed the artist's directives to two women, who in turn passed them on to the workers. This verbal relay generated various misunderstandings, most

notably when Boetti forgot to specify the color of the ocean, and the women made it green instead of blue (*Mappe*, 1978). Embracing such communicational slip-pages, Boetti decided to leave the color of the ocean in the subsequent "Mappe" to the embroiderers. Ten of these works were on view at the Reina Sofía, their landmasses swathed in blue, pink, gray, green, yellow, and black oceans. Such striking chromatic variations compound the inherent instability of the world map, with its historically fluctuating geopolitical divisions, its deployment as propaganda, and its divergent methods of projection. Viewing so many "Mappe" together was a sumptuous and instructive experience, underscoring the works' radical heterogeneity and, with it, the ideologically freighted nature of cartographic representation.

Boetti once said that with the "Mappe," he "created absolutely nothing"—the contours of the maps and the colors of the flags were predetermined, while the embroiderers were responsible for the handicraft. In his compelling contribution to the exhibition's catalogue, Jason E. Smith contextualizes Boetti's work with reference to the worker insurrection at the Fiat plant on the outskirts of Turin in 1969 and the political movement Autonomia, which had "as its fundamental stakes not wages (less work, more pay), but questions of pleasure, of free time, of life outside the world of work and its system of mediations." Boetti's Duchampian refusal of work thus accrues political significance in the context of debates surrounding labor and leisure in '70s Italy. Yet his propensity to eschew work and remain prolifically productive was predicated on the anonymous labor of Afghan women, in what could accurately be described as a form of global outsourcing. The increasingly corporate logic of Boetti's practice was perhaps tacitly acknowledged in his 1972 rebranding of himself as Alighiero "e" (and) Boetti, in the manner of a business partnership. If, as has often been observed, the One Hotel prefigured relational aesthetics, then these troubling yet thought-provok-

ing aspects of Boetti's work indicate the misunderstandings and inequalities that structure human relationships.

If graphite and paper constituted the zero degree of Boetti's practice, the "Mappe" pointed in the opposite direction, toward seriality and profusion. From the '70s until his death in 1994, the artist embraced this proliferative drive. On view at the Reina Sofía were three of the vast "Tutto" (Everything) embroideries Boetti produced between 1982 and 1994, densely packed jigsaws of interlocking figures, creatures, plants, vehicles, objects, symbols, and words. Along with the gridlocked skies of Boetti's "Aerei" (Airlines), 1978–89; eye-popping, tongue-twisting word squares like *Senza titolo (Mese di marzo dell'anno mille nove 100 ottanta nove)* (Untitled [The Month of March of the Year One Thousand Nine Hundred and Eighty-Nine]), 1989; and the permutational kilims that make up *Alternando da uno a cento e viceversa* (Alternating from One to a Hundred and Vice Versa), 1993, these works waged a sensory assault on the spectator that became rather exhausting over the course of such a comprehensive exhibition. But perhaps this was all part of the game plan. Writing in 1958, sociologist Roger Caillois identified four forms of play, respectively defined by competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo. After having dabbled in each of these at various points, Boetti in his later works tended toward the fourth type—their dazzling, all-over patterns destabilizing perception and inflicting what Caillois eloquently described as "a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind." Although the sheer abundance of work at the Reina Sofía and its occasionally enigmatic presentation were not always sympathetic to the spectator, the exhibition remained true to the mischievous Boetti, a shaman and a showman to the end. □

"Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan" travels to Tate Modern, London, Feb. 28–May 27; Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 1–Oct. 1.

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From left: Alighiero Boetti, *Mappe* (Map), 1971–72, embroidery on linen, 57 1/4 x 89 3/4". Alighiero Boetti, *EMME I ELLE ELLE E... Milionovecentosettanta (EMME I ELLE ELLE E... One Thousand Nine Hundred and Seventy)*, 1970, spray enamel on wood, 11 x 11 1/2". Alighiero Boetti's *Shaman/Showman* posted on the street, Milan, April, 1968. View of "Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan", 2012. From left: *I sei sensi* (The Six Senses), 1974; *Mettere al mondo il mondo a Roma nella primavera dell'anno mille novecentosettantotto pensando a tutto tondo* (Putting the World into the World in Rome in the Spring of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Eight Thinking in the Round), 1978. Photo: Joaquín Cortés/Román Loes. *Afghan embroiderers employed by Alighiero Boetti, Peshawar, Pakistan, 1990*. Photo: Randi Malkin Steinberger.



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