

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Godfrey, Mark, "Divided Interests," *Artforum*, May 2009, pp. 204-213



Between the abundance of postwar Italy's "economic miracle" and the ascetic bent of Conceptual art, the artist [Alighiero Boetti](#) took up the multiple implications of making and thinking, consumption and revolution, local and global. His remarkable oeuvre spans both laborious craft and humorous Duchampian gesture; he went so far as to rename himself Alighiero *e* Boetti in 1972, the "and" a nod to the doubled demands on artists to be at once star persona and withdrawn auteur. On the occasion of a major retrospective of Boetti's work at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina (MADRE) in Naples, on view until May 11, *Artforum* asked critic and curator **MARK GODFREY** to examine the artist's twinned and protean practices.

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Alighiero Boetti, *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (Putting the World into the World), 1975, diptych, ballpoint pen on paper mounted on canvas, each part 62 x 77 1/2". All works by Alighiero Boetti: © 2009 Estate of Alighiero Boetti/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.

Divided Interests

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IN 1967, ON THE CUSP of *Arte Povera*'s inception, Alighiero Boetti produced the editioned poster *Manifesto*, which featured a list of young Italian artists flanked by a grid of symbols. The reference to the Futurist Manifesto was unmistakable given this title, yet while Filippo Marinetti's 1909 text had been published in *Le Figaro* to reach a large audience, Boetti created his *Manifesto* for private distribution, tacitly acknowledging that for a generation of artists emerging in the mid-1960s, the ambitions of the historical avant-garde were no longer worth even dreaming about. In the place of any artistic call to arms, Boetti printed names and signs, but none of his listed artists share the same array: This was hardly a group with united concerns. What's more, no one could even fathom what the symbols meant, since Boetti kept his code under lock and key. If the word *manifesto* derives from the Italian *manifestare*, "to show," this poster kept its message hidden. The symbols nonetheless resemble trademarks, indicating Boetti's intuition that any declaration of a new "movement" was less a political maneuver than a form of marketing for future careers.

Boetti's work to some degree anticipates Marcel Broodthaers's *Section publicité* documents, but it must also be considered in the context of Germano Celant's *Arte Povera* manifestos, the first of which appeared around the same time in 1967. Boetti's *Manifesto* reads as a witty riposte to the militant rhetoric of these documents *avant la lettre*, as well as to Celant's willingness to herald a coherent new movement. Indeed, though Celant was a crucial early supporter of Boetti's who helped the artist greatly by including him in numerous group shows, more and more it seems that the *Arte Povera* label has served to blur rather than focus our view of Boetti's oeuvre. Even when we think through Boetti's *Arte Povera* period (1966–69), the distance between his and Celant's interests is clear. The critic stood for an art that shunned representation, while Boetti made objects with everyday materials mimicking the features of the Piemonte landscape (*Collina* [Hill], 1967, in which a pile of aluminum tubes suggested rolling hills) or deflating the antique grandeur of Roman culture (*Colonne* [Columns], 1968, a series of columns made of stacked doilies from cake shops). Celant was drawn to works where energies and forces were visible in the present moment of the viewer's encounter, such as Gilberto Zorio's pieces with live electric filaments or Jannis Kounellis's sculptures with gas flames, whereas when Boetti used electricity, it was to unsettle the process of viewing, suggesting an event that was actually withheld: *The Lampada annuale* [Annual Lamp], 1966, promised to illuminate a room for eleven randomly selected seconds each year, but most likely, viewers would

miss the moment of drama. Celant was hardly concerned with child's play, yet a recurrent strategy of Boetti's was to produce objects evidencing its liberatory potential: *Rotolo di cartone ondulato*, 1966, is a roll of corrugated cardboard whose center has been pushed up, much as a rolled-up tape measure might be breached by the finger of a small child; *Legnetti colorati* (Small Colored Sticks), 1968, is a group of dyed wooden sticks bunched according to color.

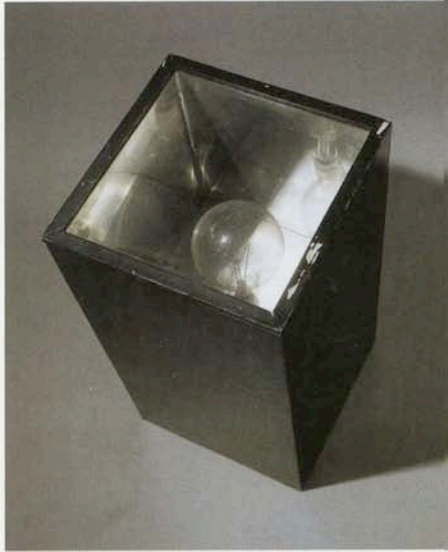
It is seldom remarked that after making some of these objects, Boetti commissioned technical plans of them, which he published in turn; these prints suggest that anyone could make the works by following the plans as instruction manuals and that consequently Boetti's objects had very little to do with the artist's subjective interaction with materials. The prints also indicate that even the most casual or

childlike construction could be appropriated by design culture. Northern Italy in the midst of its "economic miracle" was a hotbed of design, and while all the northern *Arte Povera* artists distanced their practice from good design, none reflected on the products of this industry as much as Boetti. His *Catasta* (Pile), 1967, a stack of Eternit tubes, for example, could be read as a response to the neatly contoured plastic stacking chairs designed by Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper in the early 1960s. Boetti would also make monochrome boards bearing the brand names of their attractive new colors, such as *Rosso Guzzi* and *Rosso Gilera*—suggesting (with no knowledge of Gerhard Richter's contemporaneous color charts) that even the world of the chromatic, long the battleground of northern Italian artists, was now completely overrun by the imperial



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forces of consumerism. In 1968, Boetti installed a group of objects in Amalfi, each bearing the label PROPERTY OF THE SPERONE GALLERY, indicating the marketability of the most *povera* construction; but it seems that by 1969, he had tired even of the critical possibilities of *Arte Povera*. Early that year, he purged his work with *Niente da vedere niente da nascondere* (Nothing to See Nothing to Hide), a window frame that he propped against the gallery wall and that, according to its title, emptied out visual content along with illusionism.

ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING PIECES of this time was made from more than a hundred clumps of cement arranged on the floor in the shape of a basic homunculus and titled *Io che prendo il sole a Torino il 19 gennaio 1969* (Me Sunbathing in Turin on 19 January 1969). Here was the artist's double, not hard at work in his studio but lying prostrate on the ground, his body made of undifferentiated lumps, supposedly sunbathing in the Alpine city in midwinter! The work announced a set of concerns related to Boetti's interest in consumerism, which he continued to explore until his death: What was the function and identity of the artist in postwar society, and how could the artist-subject be represented? While Giuseppe Penone, Giovanni Anselmo, Zorio, and others would produce works that challenged traditions of artistic self-portraiture (Penone, for

instance, photographed himself in mirrored contact lenses to deny viewers the sense that they could see into his character), they never addressed these questions with the persistence that Boetti did. Boetti was the only one of his generation to really think through the polemics of Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, both of whom had suggested new models of the artist-subject earlier in the decade; as Manzoni had done with his *Fiato d'artista* (Artist's Breath), 1960, and *Merda d'artista* (Artist's Shit), 1961, Boetti deflated the notion of the artist as expressive genius, as privileged creative figure. He made works presenting data about his birth date or address, but only to underline the utter banality of biographical information in the meaning of an artwork. He xeroxed his face over and over, each time making a sign next to his cheek that spelled out SELF-PORTRAIT. He even made an "inverted self-portrait" out of a boulder, which looked as if he had pressed his face into a giant lump of putty, but he then proceeded to hide this already withdrawn self-image among real stones and finally threw the object into the River Po—making an image of himself only to disappear it. Though few others in Italy sought out such reflexivity, Boetti's work resonated powerfully with Bruce Nauman's contemporaneous *True Artist* and lunar signature neons, as well as those sculptures bearing the supposed imprints of Nauman's absent body. Harald Szeemann possibly recognized this when he installed Boetti's

Opposite page: Alighiero Boetti, *Manifesto*, 1967, watercolor on printed paper mounted on canvas, 42 1/2 x 31". This page, clockwise from far left: Alighiero Boetti, *Lampada annuale* (Annual Lamp), 1966, wood, metal, glass, lightbulb, electric fixture, 29 3/8 x 14 1/2 x 14 1/2". Alighiero Boetti, *Colonne* (Columns), 1968, paper doilies, dimensions variable. Alighiero Boetti, *Io che prendo il sole a Torino il 19 gennaio 1969* (Me Sunbathing in Turin on 19 January 1969), quick-setting cement, cabbage butterfly, 69 x 35". Alighiero Boetti with *Collina* (Hill), 1967, artist's studio, Turin, Italy, 1967.



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This page, left: Alighiero Boetti with *Autoritratto in negativo* (Inverted Self-Portrait), 1968, Turin, 1968. Photo: Paolo Bressano. Right: Alighiero Boetti, *Gemelli* (Twins), 1968, black-and-white photograph and mixed media on paper postcard, 6 x 4". Opposite page, from left: Alighiero Boetti, *Order and Disorder* (detail), 1985-86, embroidery, 199 parts, each 6 1/2 x 6 1/2". Alighiero Boetti, *Alternando da uno a cento e viceversa* (Alternating from One to a Hundred and Vice Versa), 1992-93, mixed media. Installation view, Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France, 1993. Photo Egon von Fürstenberg.



sunbathing avatar right next to Nauman's work in the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" in 1969.

Boetti was not interested solely in rejecting romantic stereotypes and ironizing clichéd ideas about the artist and his mythical touch; as in his earlier work, which brought form to a certain underlying exchange between art and design, his works about the artist presented positive counterproposals to established ideas. What made Boetti's theory of the artist-subject completely distinctive was his commitment to doubling and multiplying. In 1968, he made the photocollage *Gemelli* (Twins), showing the artist hand in hand with himself—one figure looking more introverted, the other more extroverted—and sent this to friends as a postcard. He gave a performance in which he wrote a sentence simultaneously with his left and right hands, thus unsettling conventions that associated one side of the body with creativity and the other with rationality. He titled one exhibition "Shaman/Showman," reflecting perhaps on the opposed positions taken up by figures such as Joseph Beuys and Klein. Recognizing that Boetti was the name by which he was known in the public art world and Alighiero the personal name known to private friends, he famously changed his name to Alighiero e Boetti in 1972, simultaneously joining and separating his public and private selves. Boetti was aware that under the new conditions of postwar spectacle culture, young Italian artists faced contradictory pressures and were expected to be all things at once: confident public figures present at crowded openings and individual private creators making original and unique work. His works articulated the demands created by this situation, but they were not only analyses—rather, he was interested in the potential of schizophrenia. In the same years that Deleuze and Guattari proposed schizophrenia not as a disease but as a force of resistance and as an

antidote to the conformity of the Oedipal subject, Boetti realized that schizophrenia could be a productive model of the artist-subject: The artist should be introvert *and* extrovert, an everyday subject of an overly administered world *and* a special figure, shaman *and* showman, Alighiero *and* Boetti. In 1967 the phrase "*I vedenti*" appeared for the first time in Boetti's work, written with finger-poke marks in a gesso block; it would recur as a quasi signature across his later drawings. While Guattari spoke of the schizophrenic as someone with "insight," a kind of "clairvoyant," Boetti used this phrase for its related but split implications: Lifted from the blind, who used it to designate the sighted—i.e., everyone but themselves—"I vedenti" suggested that the artist was at once a "visionary" and just another member of the vast community of people with eyesight. For Boetti, the artist could be a figure of multiplicity, but the point was for the artist neither to play out a set of different personae (a concept of very little relevance to him) nor to neutralize

opposing sensibilities into harmony. Instead the artist ought to be different things at once, maintaining contradiction for its generative power.

BOETTI'S APPROACH TO SCHIZOPHRENIA helps us recognize the unique approach he took to systems in the '70s. Many of his works of that decade and after created and investigated numerical and linguistic systems, exploring various serial compositional devices, modes of communication and distribution, and the representation of information and ideas. These works with letters, numbers, stamps, and archives of data recall many of his contemporaries' practices—Mel Bochner's "Measurement" pieces, Sol LeWitt's "Incomplete Open Cubes," Hanne Darboven's drawings. However, while these artists used seriality as a nonsubjective, anti-aesthetic way of composing artworks, or explored systems to fathom ecological, political, and economic structures, Boetti, in a manner closer to the sensibility of the contemporaneous writers associated with the Oulipo group,

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positively delighted in permutations and combinations, in the charms of word squares and square roots and in the balance of formulas. For Boetti, systems were not only everyday and impersonal; they were magic and mystical, too. At the heart of his sense of systems was a desire to undo oppositions, not to produce synthesis but to understand the duality of everything. As he wrote in 1986,

When I look at these pairings of apparently antithetical concepts I think that every thing contains its opposite, which means that the most appropriate attitude should be to take things back to zero, take concepts back to zero, explain them, open them out; just as you can open out a folded sheet of paper, so you can order and disorder a pair or a class of concepts without ever privileging one of the two terms, always seeking one in the other.

The task was to generate systems that maintained opposing tendencies of order and disorder. This opposition was clearly articulated in *Ordine e disordine* (Order and Disorder), 1973, which contained one hundred small embroidered word squares. Each square's colors were different, and the shapes were randomly dispersed across a wall, but within each, the sixteen-letter Italian phrase ORDINE E DISOR-

DINE fit perfectly into a neat grid. Much later, Boetti began a series of works titled "*Tutto* (Everything)." Here was another demonstration of the co-presence of order and disorder: Tiny embroidered forms derived from cutout magazine pictures cram the surface, which becomes a stunning disarray of color and shape, yet everything fits together and no one color predominates. As these works show, Boetti's interest in multiplicity articulates his understanding of the greater unity and totality of the world.

One of the main groups of Boetti's systems works uses language, and many of these pieces destabilize the authority of information by troubling the delivery of textual content. In 1968, he inscribed phrases from historical texts into panels of quick-drying gesso, whose material would harden before the texts could be completed. Later, though right-handed, he would pen lengthy stream-of-consciousness texts onto his works with his left hand, since "writing with the left hand is drawing." If writing was one target, reading was another: In 1966-67, at the same time as he was making the monochrome panels bearing color trade names, he produced a series of boards in which odd phrases, spelled out with cork letters on painted backgrounds, were suspended out of any context. Phrases like THE THIN THUMB and

FROU FROU sparked whatever associations a viewer wanted; words fled the tyranny of fixed meaning. Later there were the embroidered word squares. Phrases were arranged in a grid with letters running down vertical lines and words running on from one another without breaks; every letter was differently colored and set against a different-colored ground. We see colors and patterns before we read, so that when we *do* read the phrases in these works, our understanding, delayed, is sharpened.

In Boetti's many drawings based on numerical progressions (dating from the mid-1970s), there is always a sense that the most basic mathematical sequences produce unexpected visual disarray. Strict rules govern the compositions, but within the restrictions, seemingly endless variations play out. Boetti's grandest work of this kind was one of his last—the 1993 installation *Alternando da uno a cento e viceversa* (Alternating from One to a Hundred and Vice Versa), realized at Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain in Grenoble, France, the year before his death. Boetti had fabricated fifty kilims designed in different art schools across France. Each group of students had been told to obey the same compositional rules: They should draw up a ten-by-ten grid, dividing each of the hundred large squares into a hundred tiny units. In the top left square, one unit was black and ninety-nine white; in the next, ninety-eight black and two white; then ninety-seven white and three black; and so on. The compositional system for each kilim was identical, but their appearance varied completely; what's more, making sense of the system depends on where viewers stand in relation to the object spread on the floor at their feet.

Such systems also structured many of Boetti's postal pieces, such as those consisting of hundreds



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of envelopes on which rows of colored stamps would be serially arranged in all possible combinations. Yet while the system determined the number of envelopes and the arrangement of the stamps, Boetti could not control the exact appearance of the piece, since each envelope, as it passed through post offices, would be inked across its surface by postal workers playing an unknowing part in the work's creation. The unpredictability of distributional and informational systems intrigued Boetti, and this is particularly evident in one of his most important works of the '70s, *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo* (Classifying the Thousand Longest Rivers in the World), 1970–77, a project he worked on with his wife, Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, for more than seven years, gathering data sent by geographers across the world. The project resulted in an artist's book and two embroideries. In these final works, the order of river lengths was fixed, but what did it really mean to archive fluidity? How could a river be measured? Along which bank? During which season? From which source? And in any case, do we care about precise data, or do we let our mind imagine the rivers and flow off around the world? The project opened up all these questions, undermining its own data even as it presented it, and in so doing suggested the disorder at the heart of all projects aiming to order the world.

PERHAPS THE MOST DISTINCTIVE and beautiful group of Boetti's systems works are the "Biros." In these, Boetti would lay down a column of letters on one edge and then cover the expanse with short ballpoint-pen marks, creating nuanced color fields with the cheapest and most dispensable of modern writing instruments. Commas were reserved in white from

the expanse of ink, and tracing back and forth from the alphabetic list to these commas, one could slowly spell out words. Everyday idioms became magic as they were reincarnated as stellar constellations in a night-dark blue expanse of ballpoint ink. The time of reading was slowed down, and time itself was often the subject. Some works simply spelled out the dates they were made—but rather than treating dates as dull facts or as banal readymades, Boetti recognized their magic, since the meaning of a date is personal to each person who sees it, and a date's resonance grows more nuanced with time. Another "Biro" work reads *DARE TEMPO AL TEMPO*, "to give time to time," clearly articulating one of the artist's guiding principles. Boetti had been concerned with time since the very beginning, hostile to the measured efficiency of northern Italian culture. *Lampada annuale* was the first sign of this passion; some years later, Boetti produced reams of drawings by tracing over all the grid lines of graph paper, discovering what he called "bourgeois" habits (the most efficient ways of going over all the lines) and defeating them by finding inefficient ways to cover the lines. Later in the '70s, he made drawings recording the chimes of the church clocks around his Rome studio, charting the sound of time's passage rather than letting the hours govern his daily activities. Slowing down time was a way to open up thought, as occurs in another of the largest "Biros," *I sei sensi* (The Six Senses), 1973. Each panel contains the name of a sense, and eventually (and with some difficulty) we read the word *PENSARE*, which raises the question of what it means to name "to think" as a sense alongside *VEDERE* (to see), *TOCCARE* (to touch), and so on. For Boetti, artistic thought was like sensing: Thought was receptive to the world, direct, less analytic than intuitive.

Yet of all the "Biro" works, the one that perhaps more than any other embodies a Boettian principle of the artwork is *Mettere al mondo il mondo*, 1975, translatable as both "putting the world into the world" and "giving birth to the world." As I understand it, the phrase suggests that instead of adding new things to the world (paintings, sculptures, photographs, and imaginary images, for example), the artist should rework the existing materials of the world (which could be numbers and words, as well as images and objects), allowing them to rearticulate our understanding of the world. Quite clearly, even though this stance involves a rejection of traditional artistic media, it has little in common with the idea of dematerialization that supposedly preoccupied some of Boetti's peers and that characterizes much work associated with systems. The spirit of Boetti's work is completely opposed to this. Through the process of making art, the artist with the most humble of means should create a new world.

The "world" in this formulation seems a category disconnected from the realities of geography, politics, and history, and this utopian aspect of Boetti's thought is evident in other works, such as the dreamy series of "Aerei" (Airplanes), 1977–91, which features skies jammed with military and civil planes from different countries, flying together with no hierarchy or perspective. But as ever, there is a contrasting sensibility, too. As early as 1967, Boetti began to produce works registering the contingencies of global conflicts, the first of which was a series of copper plates etched with the outlines of maps of war zones published on the front page of Italian newspapers between 1967 and 1971. Rather than indicating any of Boetti's personal opinions about these wars, *Dodici forme dal 10 giugno 1967* (Twelve Forms from June 10, 1967), 1967–71, represents something of the impact of mass media on the subject, showing how information is decontextualized and how reporting so often dulls awareness of the violence of warfare. This work possibly paved the way for the artist's most famous series, in which the image of the world recurs. These are the embroidered *Mappa* pieces, produced between 1971 and 1993 according to a schema whose simplicity delighted Boetti because he needed to make so few choices in coming up with the compositions: Each country was colored according to the design of its national flag. The *Mappa* should be seen as an opus that updates the genre of history painting: Collectively, these works register shifts in national borders (for instance, the breakup of the Soviet Union), the aftermath of decolonization (particularly in the African flags), and alterations in methods of representing the globe, as classic projections in the early maps gave way to ones increasing the size of Africa and Latin America.



This page: Alighiero Boetti, *Codice: Eritrea libera* (Code: Free Eritrea), 1975, eighteen stamped envelopes, 18 1/2 x 33 1/2". Opposite page: Alighiero Boetti, *Aerei* (Airplanes), 1977, triptych, Acquarello paper mounted on linen, each part 55 1/2 x 39 3/4".

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As is well known, these *Mappa* were produced by embroiderers in Afghanistan. Boetti's involvement with that country increasingly seems one of the most compelling aspects of his practice, more so in light of the events that have taken place there since his death, but what's significant is not just the unusualness of his activities (for instance, he set up a hotel called One Hotel in 1972) or the fact that his connection to Afghanistan signaled a long-standing relationship between a Western artist and an Eastern culture that was not in any way based on exoticism or colonialist impulses.

Though Boetti was never very concerned with the labor politics of '70s Italy, one of its theorists might help us to account for his move in a new way. Philosopher Paolo Virno recently put forward a notion of flight or displacement as a form of resistance:

Boetti's turn to Afghanistan can be seen not just as a move along the hippie trail but as a "third way," a nondialectical response to the impasse facing Italy in the early 1970s. But surely the most important aspect of the artist's involvement with Afghanistan concerns production. At a time when his contemporaries were turning to film, photography, slide presentations, and so on, Afghanistan opened up possibilities for Boetti to use traditional media such as

weaving and embroidery alongside industrial ones such as Biro. (Later, and in different contexts, he would also use Japanese calligraphy, mosaic, and even the Etruscan frieze.)

Even more significant than the materials produced and the crafts employed is the *structure* of production that Boetti instigated in Afghanistan. Working through intermediaries, he would employ teams of women (for embroidery) and men (for weaving) to fabricate his works. He would send

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over drawings and instructions that specified several, but not all, aspects of the final work. In the *Mappa*, for instance, Boetti stipulated the projection of the globe and the colors of the flags, but after some years he left the hue of the oceans unspecified (the embroiderers often used whatever color threads were closest at hand); meanwhile, some maps had a border containing texts of the embroiderers' determination. The final works included the input, therefore, of at least two authors. Boetti was careful to

distinguish this model of working from that of collaboration: The artist did not discuss or negotiate his ideas with the producers, nor did they seek his approval about their interventions. The model of production simply allowed for two authorial voices to feed into the final work without compromise—in other words, the model was keyed into Boetti's idea of critical schizophrenia. In addition, the model of production suited Boetti, as it accorded with his resistance to the speed of Western modernity.

Usually, when artists employ third-party fabricators, the point is to hasten production, but Boetti's structure necessarily built in delay. Whenever he ordered a batch of works, he would need to wait up to two years for their delivery. Slowness was a necessary part of making elaborate embroideries and of transporting them from

Central Asia to Europe. It wasn't so much that Boetti was fetishizing "Eastern" calm; rather, setting up production in Afghanistan literally meant "giving time to time."

After the Soviet invasion of 1979, Boetti's workforce fled Afghanistan for Peshawar, Pakistan. Increasingly, the texts inserted by the embroiderers and weavers voiced the distress of exile and the desire to return to their country. Boetti was completely

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sympathetic to the cause of the Afghans, but setting his own views aside, what is compelling is the structure of production that allowed political messages to be inserted into the work and then conveyed by the work to a distant audience. Boetti's employment of a workforce of noncollaborative yet active craftspeople signals a new moment in radical twentieth-century notions of artistic production (I'm referring to the line connecting László Moholy-Nagy and Donald Judd), and equally innovative was the mode of political address that this production facilitated. Several other artists at the time were interested in propelling political content in new ways—Cildo Meireles, for instance, inserted messages into established systems of distribution—but Boetti's works constituted platforms from which *other* voices could speak.

Boetti's work suggests that instead of adding new things to the world (paintings, sculptures, photographs, and imaginary images, for example), the artist should rework the existing materials of the world (which could be numbers and words, as well as images and objects), allowing them to rearticulate our understanding of the world.

BOETTI REMAINS A HARD ARTIST to fit into art-historical narratives. Since his death in 1994, it has become increasingly clear that he is one of the most valuable and productive figures of his generation for younger artists as well as for curators. And yet the major art-historical accounts of the period between

the '60s and the '80s hardly register Boetti's presence. Since his passing, important exhibitions of his work have taken place in Houston, Turin, New York, London, and elsewhere, and now MADRE in Naples has mounted a new presentation, curated by Achille

Bonito Oliva, which goes some way toward revealing the breadth of his magnificent oeuvre's legacy.

Oliva's intention in the installation is to explore the circular temporality of Boetti's practice and to let us work backward so we can see how the later pieces came out of the earlier moment—to chart in reverse the journey Boetti took from making works focused on "I" to those on "we." At the entrance of the show, viewers are invited to turn left or right; whichever way they choose, a corridor of small rooms with Boetti's later works leads toward the opposite side of the building, where a number of his earlier works can be found. No fewer than five documentary videos are included in the show, often projected very large alongside major works. I found the organization of the galleries quite contrived, since you inevitably follow one route around the

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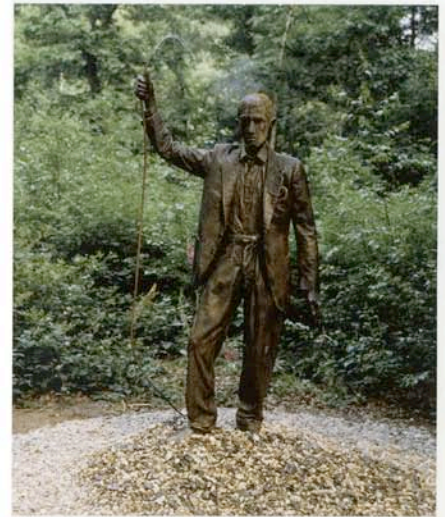
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circle, going chronologically backward and then forward; what's more, some key early works (such as the *Lampada annuale*) are rather randomly inserted into the opening galleries. The presence of the documentaries and their pervading sound tracks was distracting—however interesting their content—but I was thankful to the curator for some major discoveries. For instance, Oliva unearthed a very early Super 8 silent film made in 1969 in the apartment of Boetti's gallerist. Boetti is shown before a large Frank Stella painting with slanting stripes, bouncing a red balloon and balancing a long pole on his hand, before turning to the camera, grinning, attempting to align himself with the diagonal axis of the Stella, and falling down (all this done completely independent of John Baldessari's bouncings, or *This Is Not to Be Looked At*, 1974). If Stella stood at this point for high seriousness and formal balance, then Boetti, performing in front of the painting, presents a more playful image of the artist but makes the very serious points that true balance depends on the body's action over time and that chance (here, the unpredictable movement of the balloon) can never be wished away.

Another positive aspect of the show's organization is the emphasis thrown onto Boetti's late drawings on both sides of the entrance. These were made at a moment when Italian art was feted for a reactionary return to neo-expressionist painting with imaginary, magic-realist scenes. It is clear how little this tendency attracted Boetti. Some of his drawings were commissioned copies of magazine covers, and others contained a lexicon of marks—Japanese seals, colored blots made with wet paper, imprecise outlines made by massaging paper over objects, tracings, shapes drawn with compasses, stenciled images filled with blown ink, and so on. Never are there expressive graphic gestures or invented images: Instead we find copied fragments of newspapers and the everyday

objects that were scattered across Boetti's studio table. One of the documentaries at MADRE features Boetti visiting a class of schoolkids and showing them how to blow ink over stencils of cutout animals. The clip reveals how in his later drawings the artist returned to the childlike jubilation of his early objects and how these drawings are about the charms of producing images of what is around us using what is around us—*mettere al mondo il mondo*. Each late drawing is stamped at the bottom with *I VEDENTI*, and after a time another implication becomes evident. As much as the phrase alludes to the artist, so, too, it acts as an invitation to the viewer: Use your eyes, but see beyond what's there to a world of ideas as well.

Walking through the MADRE presentation, one can begin to sense the ways that Boetti has become important for a younger generation. Some artists have been drawn to the combination in his work of a rigorous conceptual framework and an intense sensitivity to the sensuousness of materials, a combination not often evident in some of the drier practices that emerged from late-'60s art. Without ever becoming religious or mystical, Boetti opened himself up to the fascinations of esoteric thought, always exploring ideas with mundane means such as Biro pens; this is another "third way" he took. For the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Boetti who possibly appeals the most is the one who sets up strict rules and then leaves the game to be played by others; this has been the model for some of his shows. For artists such as Fischli & Weiss, Boetti surely stands as a model of an artist prepared to waste time, whereas for Francis Alÿs, perhaps, Boetti's interests in working with craftspeople appeals, as does the democratic impulse of his late work—for instance, Boetti's production of thousands of word squares, which (before he died) were cheap enough for most of his admirers to afford. In another vein, one might



think about the proximity of Boetti's *mettere al mondo il mondo* to Martin Creed's formulation, *the whole world + the work = the whole world*, Creed being another artist who inflects our sense of the world without inventing new images. For Italians such as Maurizio Cattelan, on the other hand, perhaps Boetti's most important legacy concerns his approach to artmaking and to the figure of the artist. In the central courtyard at MADRE one can see the artist's final great work, a cast bronze self-portrait. Here is another traditional medium put to work in a non-traditional way. *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait), 1993, presents Boetti as an everyman. Where predecessors such as Aleksandr Rodchenko designed uniforms to show themselves as real laborers, Boetti appears as a lowly office worker bedraggled in a tatty old suit. Earlier artists might have raised fists or banners, but Boetti holds up a pathetic hose. It sprinkles water onto the artist's face, and the liquid drips off his nose and down onto his pants, so he seems in a perpetual state of self-humiliation. But underneath the top of the figure's skull there is a heating element, and when water hits this point, some of the splash fizzes off in a burst of steam. At times I have taken this to suggest, rather depressingly, that the artist believed that all his ideas would disappear, but another interpretation seems equally possible. Boetti's mind was so full of ideas that he needed water to cool him down. Like the clouds of steam billowing across the courtyard in Naples, his ideas will continue to spread, blowing away to who knows where. □

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Opposite page: Alighiero Boetti, *Mappa* (Map), 1978, embroidery on canvas, 35 1/4 x 57 1/4". This page, left: Alighiero Boetti, *Tutto* (Everything), 1988-89, embroidery, 60 1/4 x 39 1/4". Right: Alighiero Boetti, *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait), 1993, bronze; electric and hydraulic attachments, 85 x 35 x 23 3/4".

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