

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

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ARTE POVERA

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Neon; metal can; tubing; fountain pump; wood; clay; terracotta; rubber; leather; glass; bronze; silk; oil on canvas; steel bench; refrigerating unit; lead; candle; tobacco leaves; embroidery on canvas. This is the stuff out of which the works in this show are made by Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz.

A staggering range of materials, of poor materials. Indeed, Arte Povera. But Germano Celant, preeminent critic of said art movement, cautions us against dwelling on materiality: "Art is taken to be not only an object of perception but also of thought, in which the essence of its meaning has real importance".

Thought, process and a utopian impulse are no doubt the artists' intended emphasis. However, I find striking the materials, left relatively in their naked state. As such, they base the set of economic relations in which they are implicated. On the one hand there is moribund (in the "first" world) industrial capital (steel bench; neon); on the other, pre-modern economy (embroidery; a candle). In between, are colonial relations whereby raw materials get extracted from dependent economies for northern usage (tobacco leaves; rubber).

These are uneven relations, though on the whole more tenuous today with the enormous reversal of the international economy taking place. From this perspective, then, the melancholic utopia that infuses this art practice becomes its predominant aspect.

Each of the works, in their own way, attempts to reconcile metonymic fragments of the past and the waning present into a harmonious whole. Boetti's *Far Quadrare Tutto* may be taken as quintessential. The title means "Make everything square" ("square" both as noun and verb). It is embroidered in op-like alternately inversed black and white letters in squares. But it doesn't square. The medium of embroidery and the op effect disrupt each other's effect, cancelling the other out. That this does not go unnoticed by Boetti is evinced by the fact that the



EXHIBITION VIEW.
PHOTO DAVID REGEN.

piece consists of fifteen equal sized panels, which could never form a square.

This recuperation of disparate fragments is not an act of bricolage, for a higher unity is sought, albeit futile. Melancholia is pervasive; it is the flipside of all backward looking utopia because they are thoroughly impossible, and because the past, the designated haven, is mythically construed as a perfect whole.

What remains compelling, instead, is the relational situatedness of these art objects through their abrasive materiality. It is a conjuncture that has been repropounded by recent art practices. Simulationist [sic] art locates itself analogously. Displacing attention from the object per se, while insisting on its material allure, "simulation" art ensconces itself in the relations that have succeeded industrial capital, post-industrial information/communications capital.

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