

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bennett, Christopher G., "Substantive Thoughts? The Early Works of Alighiero Boetti,"  
*October* 124, Spring 2008, pp. 75-97

## Substantive Thoughts? The Early Work of Alighiero Boetti\*

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*In 1948 I tore a large sheet of brown paper to get little rectangular pieces that I piled up and with which I erected a rather unstable column. . . . In 1962 I began to detach the filters from cigarettes, with which I created long strips. . . . In 1958, under the guidance of Mr. Sergio Vercellino, a resident of Vagliumina and an agriculturalist, I cut, with a scythe, about three square meters of grass.*

—Alighiero Boetti, 1967<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the origins of his practice retrospectively, Alighiero Boetti assigned peculiar weight to a series of seemingly banal gestures enacted at a time when he did not view himself as an artist. He thus located the beginnings of his artistic work in pre- or non-artistic forms of self-consciousness and materiality. Boetti's report of cutting grass in Vagliumina, an Alpine village north of the artist's native city of Turin, is a case in point. How were the clippings arranged in the countryside that day—in tidy, one-cubic-meter stacks, perhaps, or in a single inchoate mound? Such actions, real or imagined, are implicitly equated with Boetti's later work, and the comparison is well-grounded. (Take, for example, the resemblance between Boetti's construction of a pillar made from pieces of brown paper in 1948 and his piling of doilies purchased from a pastry shop along metallic axes to fashion *Colonne* (Columns) in Rome twenty years later.)

The behaviors recounted above are most pertinent to Boetti's three-dimensional works from 1966 to 1969, which were made from a variety of materials acquired at hardware shops, building supply stores, and flea markets, such as Perspex, PVC pipes, metallic screening, copper, Eternit, prefabricated cork letters, and camouflage fabric—that is to say, his *Arte Povera* work. Rather than taking *Arte Povera* as its point of departure, however, this article approaches

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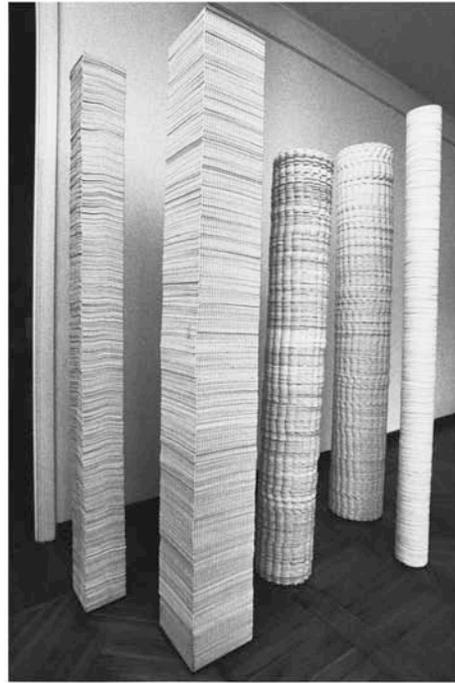
1. Barry Schwabsky, "Alighiero E Boetti," *Artforum* (February 2000), p. 115.

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*Alighiero Boetti. Colonne. 1968.*  
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the Archivio Alighiero Boetti, Rome.

Boetti's production from this period as a distinctive phenomenon that is in many ways at odds with prevailing understandings of an *Arte Povera* aesthetic. Despite their seemingly simple and off-the-cuff character, these works encompass a set of extreme contradictions that have not yet been adequately puzzled out.

While seeking to unravel some of the difficulties and aporias posed by Boetti's work, I shall also offer an alternative to Germano Celant's theorization of the artist's production as an art of "pure presence" that is "stripped of ambiguity."<sup>2</sup> Celant's conception of Boetti's early work has enjoyed remarkable staying power since it was first formulated in several brief, programmatic essays. The three most important include Celant's text for the first *Arte Povera* exhibition at Genoa's Galleria la Bertesca in September 1967; "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War," which was published in November 1967 in *Flash Art*; and his catalog essay for Boetti's solo show at Galleria la Bertesca in December 1967. The perceived predominance of Celant's reading, however, is challenged by the very different responses to Boetti's production offered by contemporary critics such as Tommaso Trini, Daniela Palazzoli, and Henry Martin—translated into English

2. Germano Celant, *Arte Povera—Im Spazio* (Genoa: Galleria la Bertesca, 1967), n.p. Celant claims that *Arte Povera*'s protagonists produce work that "underlines, with its pure presence . . . no longer reality's ambiguity, but rather its univocality." In the catalog for Boetti's solo exhibition at Galleria la Bertesca in 1967, he argues that Boetti "tends to strip the image of its ambiguity" (Celant, "Per i ciechi tutto è improvviso," p. 10.)

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here for the first time. For Trini, Boetti's premiere at the Galleria Christian Stein, Turin, in January 1967, is representative of an asystematic system within which narcissistic projections are at stake. Palazzoli's review of Boetti's contribution to the *Con Temp L'Azione* exhibition in Turin in December 1967 traces a dialectical understanding of Boetti's practice in which repetition and difference, appropriation and innovation, and nature and artifice (the former is all too often associated with Arte Povera to the exclusion of the latter) interact unstably.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, in his catalog essay for Boetti's solo exhibition at Galleria la Bertesca in December 1967, Martin elucidates the simultaneously utopian and dystopian characteristics of Boetti's early projects.

In exploring these critics' responses, I intend moreover to cast light on the complex politics of Boetti's art, which is neither activist nor explicitly ideological. Boetti maintained a radically ambivalent stance vis-à-vis the feminist, labor, and antiwar protests that defined 1960s Turin.<sup>4</sup> His early projects were of the Left, however, in their defiance of the reificatory pressures imposed on artistic practice in the post-Fascist, newly commercialized society established during the so-called economic miracle or "boom."<sup>5</sup>

These circumstances included the rise in the number of art galleries in Italian cities, which could present even the most seemingly radical gesture as art. Artists encountered an unprecedented commercialization of the public sphere and a demand for exchangeable objects fabricated by an individual marketable author. At the same time, the overwhelming obligation to produce and the collectivist and anti-capitalist sentiments redoubled by the American-led war in Vietnam incited artists to seek freedom in work that could be carried out beyond the confines of the art gallery and/or outstripped the trappings of the rarefied art object. Boetti, for one, viewed the object "as a somewhat dubious concept"<sup>6</sup> (to borrow Jasper Johns's apt expression) and in his 1972 interview with Mirella Bandini went so far as to claim: "I've never been interested in the object."<sup>7</sup>

Despite Boetti's terse and seemingly carefree negation of the self-contained object, the works he produced have their own conceptual logic, comprising a concentration on the artist's embodied gesture as the locus of intention, an isolation of language proper as the subject of artistic research, and a fascination with the interaction of contrary terms. Moreover, they entangle systematic thought with a penchant for putting forth markedly sensuous material surfaces and

3. The entanglement of nature and artifice with respect to both Boetti's and Pino Pascali's work is explored at length in my dissertation, *Boetti and Pascali: Revisiting Arte Povera through Two Case Studies* (University of Michigan, 2008).

4. As Boetti told Mirella Bandini, "I have had no experience of socio-cultural situations, nor political ones. I was interested in these events as a citizen, not as an artist." See Bandini, *Arte Povera a Torino* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2002), p. 41.

5. For more on the "economic miracle," see Vera Zamagni, "Evolution of the Economy," in *Italy Since 1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

6. David Silvester, "Jasper Johns at the Whitechapel" (London: BBC, December 12, 1964), third program.

7. Bandini, *Arte Povera a Torino*, p. 29.

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arrangements—a doubleness that continued to fuel much of the artist's work until his death in 1994.

This split between analytic and sensory imperatives is pronounced in Boetti's work from 1966 to 1969. During this period, Boetti showed an enthusiastic interest in prefabricated materials that became available on the heels of the economic "boom," such as polystyrene, industrial paint, zinc-coated aluminum tubes, and aniline dye. Thus, while thoughts assumed extreme importance, there was also a manic attraction to artificial materials in play. This involved Boetti's immersing himself in the new materials and surface enchantments consumer society made available while retaining nonetheless critical and historical awareness that undermined passive viewing and predetermined production techniques. By the time of the *Arte Povera* exhibition at Amalfi in October 1968, however, the wonders opened up by synthetics appeared to Boetti as threatening to undermine his work's conceptual anchoring. At Amalfi, Boetti's proclaimed skepticism toward the object turned into exasperation; in the artist's words, "The exhibition at Amalfi really was the nausea of the end."<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between the ideas driving Boetti's early work and their ultimate manifestation as gallery or museum objects interests me here, as does Boetti's professed desire to displace passive rituals of viewing and to incite a mode of participation that is at once conceptual and perceptual. This desire was brusquely evident in a comment the artist made in a radio interview conducted on the beach outside the exhibition hall at Amalfi: "I don't want to waste time finding the art object. These things are suggestions, a mental method to help you see reality and life when we are all so conditioned and alienated that we cannot see anything anymore."<sup>9</sup>

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Boetti's premiere exhibition at Galleria Christian Stein in January 1967 included work constructed from a wide range of materials. The show also put forth an overwhelming number of ideas. As Trini put it in the March 1967 edition of *Bit*, "Boetti's debut has at least six to seven ideas embodied in nearly thirty different pieces."<sup>10</sup>

In his review of the exhibition published in *Domus*, Trini referred to Boetti's systematized yet fractured approach as "horizontal elaboration":

Here we see the concrete results that have emerged from a domain of infinite combination; these results are not variations on a formal theme. Rather, the show consists of finite propositions in their plurality and divergence. The work obliges us to decenter our reactions from one

8. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

9. Alighiero Boetti, radio interview at Amalfi, "Zoom—settimanale di attività culturale" (Rome: RAI, November 7, 1968), directed by Luigi Costantini, fifth segment.

10. Tommaso Trini, "Arte Oggi in Italia," *Bit*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1967), p. 26.

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work to the next. The operation consists of a horizontal elaboration. To interpret the work, it is necessary above all to deal with individual examples visually in terms of the information they each present.<sup>11</sup>

Horizontal elaboration, following Trini, involves a paradoxical combination of a state of distraction and an acute attention to individual works. It involves, moreover, a two-fold negation. First, the work unveiled at Galleria Stein undermined the assumption that a show must be anchored in a single formal theme. Second, the artist adopted an antihierarchical and composite approach to representation. The latter was evident in Boetti's synchronous deployment of sculpture, painting, collage, drawing, and a range of ready-made strategies. Boetti not only refused to work in a single medium, he blurred lines between mediums by combining them. Lacking the binding force of a formal theme or an aesthetic tradition linked to a single medium, Trini's idea of horizontal elaboration provided a suitable method of attending to Boetti's works individually while bearing in mind their positioning within a more comprehensive system.

11. Tommaso Trini, "Boetti o la costruzione non ricostruita," *Domus*, no. 457 (January 1967), pp. 29-30.



*Boetti. Installation view at Galleria Christian Stein, Turin, with Tubi PVC on far left and Catasta on far right, January 1967. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Courtesy of the Archivio Alighiero Boetti, Rome.*

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*Scala* (Ladder) and *Sedia* (Chair, both 1966) were among Boetti's best-received works at Galleria Stein, and they were typical of the exhibition as a whole in that they only loosely resembled the other works on view. The former consists of a stepladder to which excess wood has been added on all five sides. Beneath the structure, six wooden beams have been appended—altogether, these form a kind of gratuitous base. Ten beams seal off the triangular space beneath the ladder's hinge, and these loosely line up with the individual rungs that would normally be used for climbing up and down, thus forming modular units within the structure that increase in area as the viewer's eyes move from the top of the ladder down to the ground. In addition, four planks of wood have been placed over the ladder's rungs, making the structure impossible to climb. *Sedia* is a similar yet somewhat more straightforward work. The back of the chair has, in effect, been repeated three times to arrive at a hermetic unit in which it would be impossible to sit.

Paolo Fossati singled out *Scala* and *Sedia* as the most successful works at Galleria Stein. In *Flash Art*, Fossati wrote, they "are the best products yielded by Boetti's concerns. Deprived of every preconceived allusion (and therefore traditional artistic representation), these works are executed with forceful perspicuity."<sup>12</sup> In *Domus*, Trini asserted, "These are manufactured objects whose function has been hindered . . . they suggest a purpose and neutralize it, throwing into crisis our normal rapport with the object. Altered henceforth, our communication with the object is interrupted and restored at a more conscious level, that of aesthetic contemplation."<sup>13</sup>

After Trini's initially perspicuous description of *Scala* and *Sedia*, the critic's summoning of "aesthetic contemplation" catches us slightly off-guard. Trini clearly understands how these works operate, but at the last moment he seems to commit to a vague, even platitudinous conception of viewing as a rarefied, predominantly introspective process. How might we continue to unpack the crisis of communication Trini posits in less orthodox terms? The prolongation of the lines already present in the prefabricated objects constitutes an instance of lucid, quasi-mathematical projection on the artist's part, and that idea, once enacted, produces a series of definitive closures. Indeed, the continuation of the lines found in prefabricated objects is a process that resembles making a drawing. As signs, *Scala* and *Sedia* also announce, even celebrate, their purposelessness: they possess an absurd separateness from workaday life. Objects normally employed as props for work and relaxation are here withdrawn into themselves and the "theoretical vision" that motivated their production.<sup>14</sup>

Trini speaks in greater detail about *Ping Pong* (1966), another well-received work consisting of two crimson-colored boxes made from industrial paint, glass, and wood, one printed with the word "ping" and the other "pong," that light up

12. Paolo Fossati, "Mostre in Italia," *Flash Art*, no. 1 (June 1, 1967), p. 4.

13. Trini, "Boetti o la costruzione non ricostruita," p. 29.

14. Alighiero Boetti, "Intervention," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–72*, trans. John Stephen (Minneapolis and London: Walker Art Center and Tate, 2001), p. 191. In this text, Boetti says of *Scala*

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back and forth with a pause in between. In this case, the discussion assumes a decisively psychoanalytic dimension. Describing the two boxes, Trini invokes the concept of narcissism:

The monotonous alternation of "ping" and "pong" is not the only thing represented by this double-image, which involves the kind of hypnotism present in every narcissistic rapport. Between the game that we know and the image that has been devoted to it, there is something else; the luminous back and forth and the interval in between calls to mind the sounds of the game at the level of fantasy; we do not actually hear the noises but they are present nevertheless.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the essay, Trini pushes the concept of narcissism further:

The presence of [these works] is didactic. They do not transform or condition the space they occupy; their intention is only to present an image of themselves. The artistic vision is structured by the insertion of a gap between images that seek to dwell in themselves, on the one hand, and images that are projected outward, on the other hand; in this interval, consciousness finds it necessary to seize upon a reconstruction that remains full of the narcissism that resides in every vision that loves to gaze upon its own image.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Trini elucidates one of the deeper structures of Boetti's work. He puts his finger on the seductive, even strange autonomy that some of Boetti's more successful works assume; they draw viewers in, yet also keep them at a distance and elude attempts at being mastered. But there is more at work in this text. In Trini's language, the work involves the paradoxical negotiation of two forces: withdrawal and outward projection. Trini posits an interval between the former and the latter. Something abstract (an idea, image, or desire) and something palpable (a material, for instance) are actively entangled in the work, which itself stages a dialogue between these seemingly divisive contents.

Trini's evocation of narcissism remains unresolved, and it is hard to know exactly what he means by the term. "Narcissism" in a strict sense would refer to a mode of psychological engagement in which the embodied subject makes no distinction between the inner and outer worlds. A narcissistic subject, moreover, refuses to accept the outside world's resistance to his or her desires and projections. However, Trini employs the term loosely, using it to describe the way in which Boetti's works appear to retreat within themselves and seek out their own image.

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and *Sedia*, "all their prerogatives of interest" are "closed within them" and thus they "concentrate into a pure abstract theoretical vision. . . . Thus it [both *Scala* and *Sedia*] becomes potential and tenfold energy in its impossibility of carrying itself into practice."

15. Trini, "Boetti o la costruzione non ricostruita," pp. 29-30.

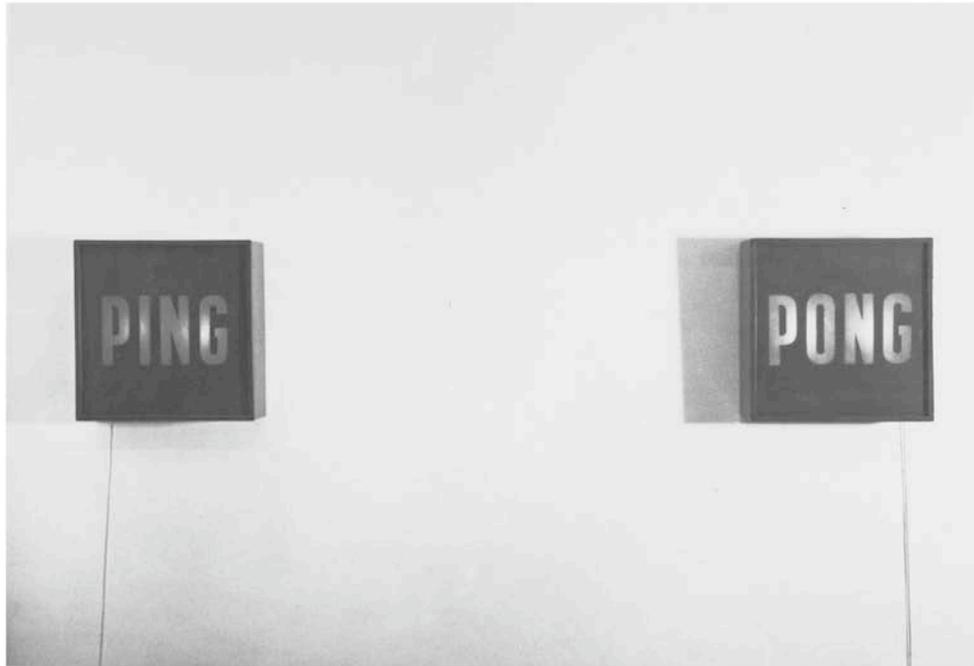
16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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*Boetti. Ping Pong. 1966. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Courtesy of the Archivio Alighiero Boetti, Rome.*

This tendency toward withdrawal is coupled with the artist's schematic presentation of an idea and his manipulation of concrete materials that in their awkwardness and density partially resist the inner workings of fantasy, thus establishing tension between the inner and outer worlds. At this point, one realizes that Trini's primary interest is not in narcissism as such, but rather in advancing a model of artistic production in which the very tension between interiority and exteriority, withdrawal and projection, stimulates and pervades the act of making and viewing art. A veritably narcissistic project would fail to acknowledge this fraught relationship and would not—as Boetti's works do—thrive on a lucid awareness of the interaction of seemingly contradictory terms. Alternatively, perhaps Trini intends to pinpoint a narcissistic dimension in which the represented thing and the thing itself coincide; but this moment of fusion gives way at another moment to a sundering of this apparent unity into its component parts.

Notwithstanding the imprecision of Trini's terminology, his discussion of

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*Boetti. Lampada annuale. 1966. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
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*Ping Pong* draws attention to the complex relationship between the idea and its manifestation in the object. This dynamic is reinforced by the work's excessive spatial and temporal disassociation. Indeed, *Ping Pong* divides the title of the famous game into mutually implicated halves with a four-foot gap between the two boxes. As Trini notes, moreover, there is a brief pause that occurs—an instant when neither box is lit. "Ping" becomes illuminated and goes out; there is a pause; then "pong" lights up and goes out. In this interchange, the work seems self-sufficient and content to dwell in its continual back and forth. At the same time, the glass's evocative red tint, the semi-transparent text, and the alternating bursts of electric light give the work a semaphoric status that, like a traffic light, makes for a presence that is and will remain contingent upon the viewer's response.

Another widely praised work at Galleria Stein was *Lampada annuale* (Annual lamp, 1966). It consists of a box, about three feet high, with sides painted dark

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blue. The box contains an electric bulb, which in concert with an internal timer, lights up once a year unexpectedly for eleven seconds. In a statement published in *Bit* in July 1967, Boetti elaborated,

One of the first works was the *Lampada annuale*. . . In this case, the factor of the unforeseen was of use to me for isolating from "measurable and organized time" the sensorial perception of the light, which thus took on a relative autonomy. The knowing of innumerable events that occur without our participation or knowledge led me to create the *Lampada annuale* as an abstract theoretical expression of one of the infinite possible events—an expression not of the event, but of the idea of the event.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, the idea assumes primary importance. Indeed, Boetti's logic does not place stress on the moment of the bulb's illumination, but rather on the hypothetical idea of its becoming lit.

The viewer's consciousness of time while standing in front of *Lampada annuale* lends the work a comic aspect. The consciousness of time's passage produces boredom, and this tips easily into humor. Indeed, *Lampada annuale* requires the viewer to wait in the gallery in anticipation. There is a cycle in place that guarantees the idea's eventual arrival in a visible form. Yet only a few people, if any, will be present when the bulb lights up. Of course, anyone can imagine the bulb turning on at a purely theoretical level, but Boetti rarifies the literal moment of illumination.

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Among the propositions shown at Galleria Stein that have received the most critical attention are the structures made from Eternit—*Catasta* (Pile, 1966), for example. An epitome of the proliferation of synthetic materials used for construction and home improvement at the time, Eternit, as its brand name suggests, is designed to last for "eternity." Yet, along with the elegant company logo, a precise date of manufacture has been stamped onto each bar of asbestos cement.<sup>18</sup>

Compared with the works discussed above, *Catasta* possesses a heightened gestural quality. There is a more pointed emphasis on the artist's embodied behavior and, what is more, a merging of action and result that extends beyond an exclusively visual consideration of the object as an inert or semi-mobile presence. *Catasta* comprises thirty-four pieces of Eternit; each bar is ninety-nine centimeters long. Boetti began by placing two units parallel with one another on the floor; two bars jutting in the opposite direction were stacked on top; then, consecutive levels were added until he could not reach any higher.

Boetti's assimilation of action and result in *Catasta* and similar objects led to

17. Boetti, "Intervention," p. 191.

18. The bars used for *Catasta* were fabricated between November and December 1966 on varying dates.

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his work's speedy absorption into Arte Povera as Celant envisaged it. As mentioned previously, Celant argued that Boetti's work confronts viewers with an art of "pure presence" that is "stripped of ambiguity," an interpretation that began to take shape in April 1967 when Boetti exhibited *Catasta* at Turin's Museo Sperimentale.<sup>19</sup> Celant's response to *Catasta* at that venue is as follows: "Decisively the most effective are [Boetti's] piles . . . only the action of accumulation gives them an autonomous and essential value. This is a type of aesthetic piling in its pure state . . ." <sup>20</sup> At the first Arte Povera exhibition held in September 1967 at Galleria la Bertesca, Boetti displayed another version of *Catasta* that reached the ceiling. In this case, Celant conflated Boetti's "aesthetic piling" with the very definition of Arte Povera production, observing:

The visual arts . . . want solely to observe and record, no longer the ambiguity of reality, but its univocality. They eliminate from their research all that might seem reflection and mimetic representation, linguistic habits, to arrive at a type of art that, to borrow a term from Grotowsky [and his Teatro Povero], one may call poor.

Ways of defining [in Boetti's *Catasta*] are reduced to ways of acting and behaving. Behavior and physical presence simply are. Boetti's gestures are . . . signs of accumulation, of clustering, of assembling, of piling. They appear . . . as mathematical equations: real=real; action=action; a univocal sign language freed from . . . every historical and worldly contingency.<sup>21</sup>

Celant's analysis is sensitive to the peculiar reductiveness that defines Boetti's work. The critic's "univocal" manner of binding artist and object, however, falls short of considering the work's materiality qua materiality (there is a marked difference between Eternit's smooth outer surface and its coarse, granular interior, for example). The viewer, moreover, encounters the Eternit logo and a precise date of manufacture instead of a signature. Through such details, the work announces its base materiality and can be read as an index of Italy's social, economic, and cultural conditions as an industrialized nation. Furthermore, in contradistinction to Celant's emphasis on Boetti's timeless aesthetic, these works cannot escape the contingencies of history. Like any industrial product, Eternit was destined to become outmoded (this substance is now obsolete due to its toxicity, for instance). The fact that each bar features its date of manufacture makes *Catasta's* contingent character all the more apparent; the work is also subject to rearrangement in different institutional contexts.

Adjacent to *Catasta* at the Galleria Stein, Boetti exhibited *Tubi PVC*

19. Celant, *Arte Povera—Im Spazio*, n.p., and "Per i ciechi tutto è improvviso," p. 10.

20. Germano Celant, "Situazione 67," in *Museo Sperimentale d'Arte Contemporanea* (Turin: Museo Sperimentale d'Arte Contemporanea and Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1967), p. 23.

21. Celant, *Arte Povera—Im Spazio*, n.p.

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(Polyvinyl chloride tubing, 1966), a work fashioned from PVC pipes balanced on their bottom ends. This work has frequently been compared with Marcel Duchamp's readymades, of which Boetti was certainly aware—*In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), for example, in which a snow shovel hanging from the ceiling is contestably transformed into art.<sup>22</sup> However, whereas Duchamp claimed to have selected industrially fabricated objects to which he had no strong aesthetic response, Boetti sought out materials that enthralled him. Readymade tactics—by shifting production toward impassive and oftentimes ironic strategies of appropriation—had a paradoxically liberating effect for Boetti. Hardware with practically no expressive charge seemed promising for a brief period (roughly 1966 to 1969), since it freed him up from the pressure of having to invent something *ex nihilo*.

When I made *Catasta* from Eternit [and *Tubi PVC* from PVC, Boetti told Bandini in 1972], I went to a supplier of building materials. It was thrilling to see all the fantastic things that were there! There was everything from firebricks . . . to fiberglass, to polystyrene, everything. Seeing all these things filled me with such crazy enthusiasm that in the end it turned to nausea!<sup>23</sup>

In comparison with *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, *Tubi PVC* places stronger emphasis on the enactment of a series of gestures, in this case arranging pipes in a dense, circular tuft. Boetti also intended this tuft to resemble a fluted column.<sup>24</sup> The curved depressions in Doric columns are, in effect, reversed so that they project toward the viewer in space. Thus, in contrast with American Minimalism (with which Boetti's arrangement of pipes has obvious parallels), Boetti puts mimetic relations back into the bare-bones, industrially produced object.

The gamble, however, is that the viewer will be blocked—stopped cold at the work's glossy, reflective surface. Yet, Boetti wanted to get beyond such blocking and highlight the human capacity to give direction and a semblance of order to reality through ordinary actions such as those encountered at the start of our inquiry: tearing, lining up, and, in this case, bunching together. Indeed, when Boetti put forth these PVC pipes, he did not alter them in any way beyond placing them in a circular pattern in a particular spot. The emphasis therefore does not fall on a meticulous insertion of "real things" into a complex composition, as is the case with Duchamp's incorporation of lead wire into *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even [The Large Glass]* (1915–23), for example, but rather on the artist's refusal to make alterations to materials in a way that would compromise their being perceived as the sum of a precise repertoire of gestures.

Nevertheless, *Tubi PVC* confronts the viewer with a certain duplicity. There

22. In 1966, Boetti referenced Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* in a work titled *B:W=D:L*, i.e., Boetti: Warhol =Duchamp: Leonardo, which consists of a reproduction of one of Warhol's paintings depicting Jackie Kennedy with a mustache and goatee. See Robert Lumley, *Arte Povera* (London: Tate, 2004), p. 72.

23. Bandini, *Arte Povera a Torino*, p. 29.

24. Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti in conversation with the author, Rome, 2007.

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remains an ambiguity between the experience of the work as a conceptual proposal and its status as a "beautiful" arrangement to be apprehended in an almost pre-intellectual manner.<sup>25</sup> The work thrives on the tension between the quasi-mathematical clarity of the part (the shape of each individual PVC pipe) being roughly repeated in the whole, on the one hand, and a feeling of sensual enthrallment while considering the object's opaque surface, on the other.<sup>26</sup> Celant's equations (real=real, action=action) approximate this relationship even as they ignore the ambiguities that come into play when viewers interact with the object in a specific situation. For example, the conceptual and sensory dimensions of responding to Boetti's propositions occur at two distinct levels, and, at the same time, these levels are codetermining.

After the close of his premiere exhibition, Boetti recast the tactics outlined above in a series of paintings with raised letters that mimicked paint samples titled *I Colori* (Colors, 1967). At Galleria Stein, Boetti had exhibited a number of paintings with raised lettering, such as *Stiff Upper Lip* (1966). These works featured phrases set against colored backgrounds; the phrases, however, lacked a rigorous connection to the grounds on which they appeared. With *I Colori*, Boetti reconfigured the relation between text and ground to reflect a tautological impulse.<sup>27</sup> The text on each monochromatic panel, which consists of cork letters coated with industrial enamel, states the name and serial number used to identify a shade of paint at the hardware store. The logic in Boetti's triptych *01.130 Verde vagone* (01.130 wagon green), *1133 Rosso adrianopoli* (1133 adrianople red), and *2233 Bleu positano* (2233 positano blue) (1967), for example, works as follows: 01.130 wagon green is 01.130 wagon green, 1133 adrianople red is 1133 adrianople red, and 2233 positano blue is 2233 positano blue.<sup>28</sup> Like the part-to-whole relationship in *Tubi PVC*, these colors are self-consciously redundant, yet the inclusion of text places them in a slightly different register. The presence of raised lettering—which adds a dimension of relief, a bit like braille for the sighted—and the absence of visible facture come together to derail an earnest engagement with painting in a traditional sense. That being said, these colors—freed from subservience to one-point perspective and other schema to which color can be subordinated—possess a peculiar and honed intensity.

This effect is present throughout the *I Colori* series, in which the search for

25. These are Boetti's words. Specifically, he mentioned the remarkably "beautiful" tubes used to construct *Collina* (Bandini, p. 29).

26. Boetti repeated this tactic in *Legnetti colorati* (Little colored sticks) (1968), which involved his arrangement of bundles of kindling on the floor. Boetti dipped some of these bundles into dye. This work thrives on the ambivalence between surface enthrallment (the pleasure of considering the work's multi-colored surface) and the conceptual clarity of the part (the shape of each bundle) being roughly repeated in the whole.

27. Boetti began *I Colori* with paintings made from cork letters, paper, and industrial pigment; he then executed them on cast-iron grounds; lastly, he made editions of multiples featuring paints used by the Guzzi and Gilera motorcycle companies and the Fiat corporation.

28. In particular, 01.130 wagon green was a pigment produced by Lechler for the Ferrovie dello Stato.

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*Boetti. Collina. 1967.*  
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Courtesy of the Archivio  
Alighiero Boetti, Rome.

tautology (specifically, the paint sample—an index of color’s systematization within industrial manufacture) has generated a kind of surplus chromatic intensity. To be sure, this intensity stems from the seemingly pure, undiluted form of *I Colori*. As stimulating as *I Colori* can be, however, their contrived character is also self-evident. Proceeding from the base idea of selecting a mass-produced pigment, freezing it in a work of art, and putting it forward for common perception, it becomes clear that these colors are not entirely reducible to the mechanizations of industrial manufacture—the “immediacy” of the pristine hues used to promote new automobiles, for example. Each color becomes relevant for a much longer period of time than its manufacturer ever envisaged.<sup>29</sup>

In December 1967, after concluding a phase of production dedicated primarily to *I Colori*, Boetti constructed a second ambitious work made from pipes, in this case zinc-coated aluminum tubes. He contributed this work, which he titled *Collina* (Hill, 1967), to Turin’s cross-gallery exhibition *Con Temp L’Azione*. In the event’s catalog, its curator, Daniela Palazzoli, analyzed *Collina* as follows:

Tubes are clustered together and put forth not as the product of a purely mental operation, but rather one that is tied to reality mimetically: hills. The work is a leap outside of the system . . . it is an ingenuous reinvention of the world’s materials. But it is also an autonomous invention in which the viewer is unable to participate, one that is static, absurd.

29. For a more extensive discussion of the socio-political implications of *I Colori*, see my dissertation.

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We need to articulate our understanding of the work dialectically. Here, we see an appropriation of products; a method of projection tied to linguistic convention; a process loaded with potential for difference. The construction of a zone of artifice tends to be defined not as gesture, but rather as the attitude that underpins them.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Celant's reading of Boetti's work as univocal and antimimetic, Palazzoli regards *Collina*, in particular, as a structure in which sheer materiality and mimesis, appropriation and invention, interact in a state of productive tension; an ideal synthesis of these oppositions or an out-and-out elimination of them, in Palazzoli's text, is deferred.

If Palazzoli ultimately views Boetti's work as a "leap outside of the system," Henry Martin's essay for Boetti's one-man show at Galleria la Bertesca the same month (which primarily consisted of cement sculptures that were lost when Boetti changed studios in Turin in the spring of 1969) offers a shrewder account of the limits circumscribing the artist's early work—*Collina*, for example. There is first the moment of breakthrough, which Martin describes as follows: "These fundamental concepts and materials with which Boetti works . . . are handled as if they were just discovered, as if no one in the entire psychological and intellectual history of the human race had discovered them previously."<sup>31</sup> Given such exhilaration, Martin argues, Boetti's works also contain "an angst due to the scarcity of moments when these propositions are understood, the fact that when they are understood it does not seem to make much of a difference, and also the rapidity with which the avant-garde is able to slide into retro-garde given the ease with which the mind reifies these discoveries [into verbal constructs and products]." Martin continues,

There's the euphoria for the conceptual modification of these things and the discovery that the world is larger, richer, and less recalcitrant than we had believed beforehand, and then there is the anxiety that derives from the realization that after the discovery, the world is in fact just as unalterable and recalcitrant as it was before. . . . In the end, Boetti presents us with changes that have not changed a thing, as if to prove to us the necessity of effecting another change.<sup>32</sup>

Like Trini and Palazzoli, Martin casts light on the operative antinomies in Boetti's practice. An impression of breakthrough gives way to an awareness of reality's rigidity. Furthermore, there is an overriding emphasis on the work of art's enactment, as if the double experience of discovery and disenchantment could determine its public reception.

30. Daniela Palazzoli, *Con Temp L'Azione* (Turin: Galleria Punto, 1967), n.p.

31. Henry Martin, untitled, in *Alighiero Boetti* (Genoa: Galleria la Bertesca, 1967), pp. 16–17.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

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Boetti once referred to 1968 as "a year of baroque extravagance," one in which he went wild exploring the possibilities opened by synthetic materials.<sup>33</sup> It was also a year in which Italian artists more broadly began pushing beyond the limits of the gallery system. Boetti began a collective outdoor project, the so-called *Parco magico* (Magic park). A private collector had given the artist free reign over a hill located in Ivrea. Boetti took Pino Pascali, Mario Merz, and others to the site and discussed the possibility of installing works on the hill. Prospective projects included an igloo by Merz and a floating sculpture titled *Pack* by Boetti. But the patron grew impatient with the artists' lack of coordination and revoked his offer.<sup>34</sup>

Boetti also went into 1968 having just finished *Un metro cubo* (One meter cube, 1967), which consisted of a wide array of materials stuffed into a Plexiglas box. A mixture of rationality and obsessiveness underlay this juxtaposition of Styrofoam, PVC pipes, plywood, fiberglass, Eternit, and other materials. If in *Tubi PVC*, viewers were confronted with a largely hollow form, here the idea was to fill every cranny of space within the Plexiglas box. The artist went so far as to nest smaller PVC pipes within the larger ones; he also packed uncooked spaghetti into some of the work's most severely constricted and hence barely visible areas. A few months later, in March, Boetti erected his *Colonne* at Galleria Arco d'Alibert in Rome.

Boetti's enthusiasm for such materials began to unravel, however, at the large-scale Arte Povera exhibition at Amalfi, titled *Arte povera più azioni povere* (Poor art plus poor actions). The show, which took place October 4–6 and included over twenty artists, was the result of an egalitarian approach to what could be called, rather loosely, sculptural installation. Each participant arrived with materials and an idea of what he or she wanted to achieve, and worked with the others in the building reserved for the occasion, the "Arsenal of the Ancient Republic." The events at Amalfi included the posthumous installation of Pascali's six-legged spider made from artificially dyed, furry fabric, *Vedova blu* (Blue widow, 1968). Richard Long, one of a handful of non-Italians who participated, installed a sculpture in the mountains overlooking the city and shook hands with passersby in Amalfi's main piazza while wearing his St. Martin's School of Art T-shirt. With the benefit of hindsight, Long described the show as follows:

I got off the train and found myself in this strange environment; it was like falling into a . . . troupe of circus people. . . . It was only years later that I began to realize that this was the beginning of Arte Povera. . . . The spirit of Arte Povera was . . . free and relaxing to make work in: intuitive . . . open-ended . . . lackadaisical. For me, it was a breath of fresh air.<sup>35</sup>

33. Bandini, *Arte Povera a Torino*, p. 30.

34. Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti in conversation with the author, Rome, 2006.

35. Lumley, *Arte Povera*, p. 73.

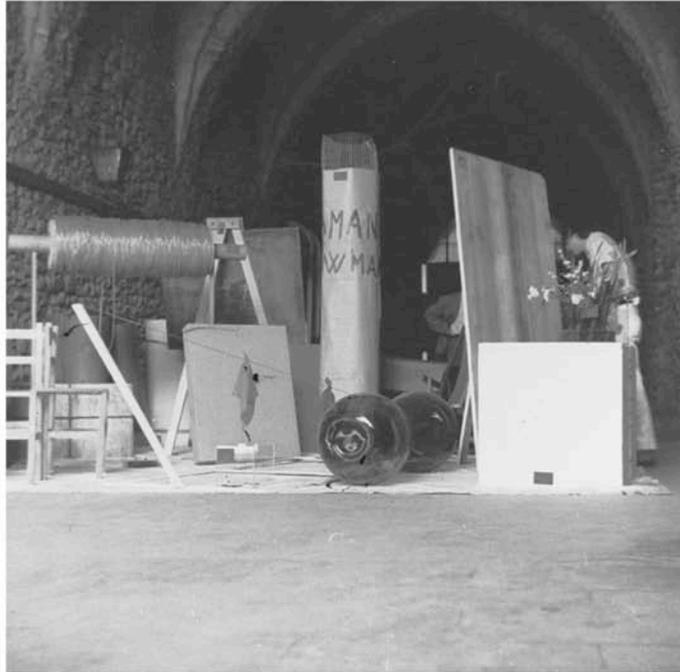
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*Boetti.*  
*Shaman/Showman.*  
1968. © 2008 Artists  
Rights Society (ARS),  
New York / SIAE, Rome.  
Courtesy of the Archivio  
Alighiero Boetti, Rome.



For the art critics in attendance at Amalfi, including Celant (the event's curator), Gillo Dorfles, and Angelo Trimarco, the exhibition primarily represented a shift of emphasis from the object-based and hence marketable work of art by an individual author toward action and collaboration. In *Flash Art*, Trimarco explained, "What's new here is the will of these artists to invent a vast repertoire of . . . gestures and environments, cut free from the rhythms of the art market and merchandising in their ephemerality. . . . To escape the process of commodification, it is necessary to negate the notion of art as a durable object."<sup>36</sup> Importantly, the event was international, and the inclusion of artists from non-Italian backgrounds, like Long, backed the larger claim that the exhibition opposed the reificatory pressures being placed on art globally. The center of that target was New York, and, more broadly, the United States, which was seen in both glowing and severely critical terms as the driving force behind Italy's rapid postwar economic recovery, on the one hand, and rampant processes of commodification, on the other.

If Long's trip to Amalfi was refreshing, Boetti's experience that October was more problematic. The artist installed *Shaman/Showman* (1968), which consisted of a depot featuring an assortment of unaltered materials (such as slabs of

36. Angelo Trimarco, "Made In," *Flash Art*, no. 9 (November, 1968) p. 4.

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Eternit and a reel of nylon cable), objects constructed specifically for the occasion, and a handful of Boetti's earlier works—his *Autoritratto in negativo* (Negative self-portrait, 1967), for example.<sup>37</sup> Boetti arranged these items in an intentionally haphazard manner on a sheet placed on the floor.

The final assemblage included the following: the lid of the crate used to ship the majority of *Shaman/Showman's* contents from Turin to Amalfi propped up with a piece of wood; planks of polystyrene sewn together with red thread to form a cube; a Plexiglas box filled with water and fresh flowers; a white metal construction featuring two upraised arms and a cord to which the artist attached a red and a teal flag; two decanters; metallic screening rolled up to form a column and covered with paper, upon which Boetti painted the words "SHAMAN SHOWMAN"; two paintings of dates depicted with cork lettering on monochromatic grounds; four wooden chairs nailed together and painted yellow; an intercom covered with green aerosol pigment fastened to the wall with a chain; a metal armature covered with low-grade Prince of Wales fabric; and a bowl filled with water and cheap perfume. Boetti placed these objects on view and left for the beach, where he spent the bulk of his time for the three-day duration of the exhibition. Before leaving, Boetti placed a label on each object mentioned above, which featured an inventory number (the reel of nylon was number 5, for example), a clause indicating that the works were the "property of Galleria Sperone" (the artist's primary dealer at the time), and a specific sale price. These labels were included as if to say, "Everything that you see within this rectangle is—in a word—merchandise."

For an exhibition intended to serve as Arte Povera's apotheosis and to initiate a shift toward collaboration, Boetti's *Shaman/Showman* made for an unusual fit. The artist essentially set up shop, left for the beach, and popped in from time to time. In a radio interview from the beach, Boetti complained bitterly that, inside, only the children smelled the perfume he had placed in a bowl; "The adults," he said, "refused to give it a sniff."<sup>38</sup>

While the exhibition's theme focused on freeing artistic behavior from processes of reification, *Shaman/Showman* drew attention to Arte Povera's profoundly ambivalent ties to both political radicalism and the commerce of making art. In effect, Boetti's contribution enacted the negative spectacle of art's utter reduction to a bric-a-brac of products. To be sure, Boetti's intervention was partially the result of his exasperation with the materials he had been using up to that point as an Arte Povera artist. But he also advanced an internal critique of the movement's guise at Amalfi, which purported to escape the process of commodification on the spot by way of a series of object-based interventions.

Celant was furious with Boetti for responding to the exhibition's theme in

37. *Autoritratto in negativo* was exhibited at the first *Shaman/Showman* exhibition in Milan in April 1968. For more on this work, see Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 175.

38. Alighiero Boetti, radio interview at Amalfi, n.p.

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this manner.<sup>39</sup> And one can see why. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more ironic response to the exhibition's general call for "collaboration" than the assembly of chairs Boetti designed for the occasion. As the sitters got down to talking, they would not be able to ignore the fact that they had their backs turned toward one another. The situation was made even more awkward by Boetti's removal of the seat from each chair, leaving this area empty. The only place for viewers to position themselves was on the wooden slats that the artist had nailed in rows between each of the chairs at seat-level, thus forming a ring.

Boetti's wares were veritably "ephemeral," however, and they thus matched the exhibition's call for transient models of artistic production. Out of all the objects Boetti exhibited at Amalfi, roughly three have survived. However, it was not the artist, but Gian Enzo Sperone, who decided each work's fate after the exhibition had ended. Sperone threw out everything Boetti exhibited save for the panels depicting dates and the green intercom, which—in a satirical fit—the artist had chained to the wall of a purportedly communal art exhibition to deter viewers from stealing Sperone's valuable property.

Little additional evidence is available that would allow us to track Boetti's reaction to the response he received at Amalfi. The artist's misgivings about the bowl filled with diluted perfume aside, the show led to a definitive turn in his practice. The break occurred in Turin six months later; as the artist explained in a personal statement,

All in all I see the . . . exhibition at Amalfi as the end of the line pursued in the previous shows. I had come to doubt my direction. Things were becoming too much about the material . . . the work had started to look like something taken straight from the hardware shop . . . there was just so much stuff! Then, I remember how in the spring of 1969 I left the studio in Turin behind. It had become a depot for prefabricated materials, from Eternit to cement . . . I left all of this behind and started again from zero with a pencil and a sheet of paper.<sup>40</sup>

The drawings Boetti refers to, formally titled *Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (The contest of harmony and invention, 1969) and consisting of a prefabricated grid traced over with graphite, were shown at Galleria Sperone in 1969. A range of approaches is evident in these drawings, which were executed according to a predetermined time frame. In some, the lines have been traced over neatly, almost as if nothing has transpired on the page. Other drawings in the dossier, however, include areas in which the gap between the prefabricated lines and those drawn by the artist has been widened to achieve a sensation of breaching between figure and ground. Generally, a few broad strokes along the

39. Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti in conversation with the author, Rome, 2007.

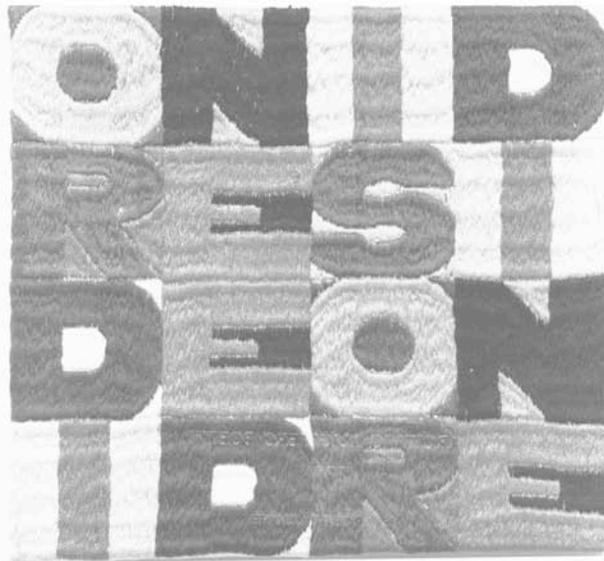
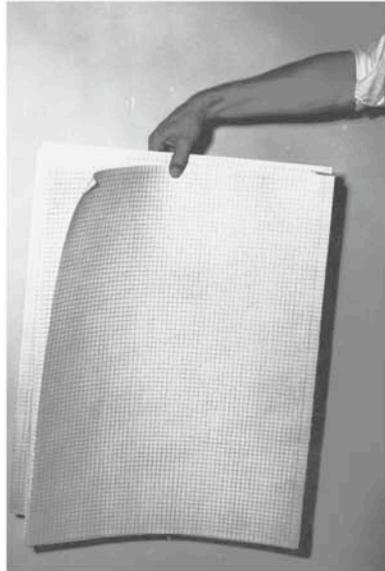
40. Antonella Soldaini, "Chronologia," in *Alighiero Boetti* (Milan: Skira, 1994), pp. 21–22.

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*Boetti. Top: Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione. 1969.  
Bottom: Ordine e disordine. 1973. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New  
York / SIAE, Rome. Courtesy of the Archivio Alighiero Boetti, Rome.*

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x and y axes are used to isolate an area, which is filled in. Boetti saw the "contest" itself in these terms:

It's a contest, the only rule being to trace over every line . . . although the space is small, the possibilities are enormous; you could do it a thousand ways. . . . [Yet] with this work I embraced a smaller field of action after *Shaman/Showman*, that vomit of beautiful things!<sup>41</sup>

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Situated within a history of Boetti's early work, *Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione*'s austerity makes for a fitting riposte to the "extravagance" of the previous year. These drawings signal, moreover, the artist's impending turn toward two-dimensional work. Indeed, by 1972 Boetti would be working almost exclusively in this format.

Further shifts in Boetti's work were caused by geographical dislocation. In 1972, he moved from Turin to Rome. Since the spring of 1971, he had also been visiting Afghanistan. One of the first works completed there was *Ordine e disordine* (Order and disorder, 1973). If the dynamics of withdrawal and outward projection, nature and artifice (the fabrication of a hill from aluminum tubes, for example), and discovery and disenchantment guided our investigation into Boetti's early production, here the interaction between and ultimate entanglement of contrary terms becomes the work's overt content. The text of its title, rendered in polychromatic thread, reads from the top down, left to right: *ordine e disordine*. As Boetti explained in "Overnight," one of his later theoretical essays, "I have often worked with the concepts of order and disorder. When I look at these pairings of apparently antithetical concepts I think that everything contains its opposite . . . 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."<sup>42</sup>

Boetti's anti-hierarchical stance, although explicitly stated rather late in his career, is apposite to his entire body of work. Indeed, the artist's turn to flat work at the close of the 1960s did anything but efface the investment in reciprocal opposition that ran throughout his earliest projects. What seems to be at stake with Boetti's turn to two-dimensional work after the exhibition at Amalfi is not a full-fledged transformation but rather a shift away from a particular type of object making. The artist left behind the assortment of artificial materials that he had been using up to that point and moved toward a highly schematic, ultimately gallery-bound two-dimensionality. What is more, this new format permitted a sharpening of the earlier work's investment in ambiguity.

41. Bandini, *Arte Povera a Torino*, p. 33.

42. Alighiero Boetti, "Overnight," in *Arte Povera*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev and trans. Liz Heron (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 239 [translation modified].

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Despite Boetti's divergence from some of his Arte Povera peers whose work better corresponded to Celant's theories of "univocal" presence, the artist was not alone in envisaging an anti-hierarchical perspective that carried an edge of social criticism, even of political dissent, after the collapse of Fascism.<sup>43</sup> In *Opera aperta* (*The Open Work*, 1962), Umberto Eco, for one, had already outlined a position matching Boetti's as an artist. As Eco noted in his essay "Form as Social Commitment," "The work . . . proposes itself as [a] structure that reproduces the very ambiguity of our being-in-the-world . . . [Although many artists] refused to speak of a political project in their art, they implied it in the way they looked at the world, and turned this way of looking at the world into their project."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the same could be said of the simultaneous intermingling and splitting between idea and object that characterizes Boetti's early projects, whether he was working within or beyond the confines of the art gallery, the context of a festival, or the accepted parameters of a larger artistic movement.

The "univocal" rhetoric Celant used to promote Arte Povera at its inception drew attention to the work's status as a completed event. In underlining this notion of self-sufficient or unambiguous presence, Celant got it partly right with respect to Boetti, capturing something of the finitude and radicalism of Boetti's idea-driven gestures. However, what makes Boetti such a compelling artist is the way in which his work can be read both in Celant's terms and in explicit negation of them. Trini's, Palazzoli's, and Martin's interrogations of Boetti's work have borne this out.

Oddly immediate, Boetti's work simultaneously prevents the viewer from endowing the object with any permanent autonomy. Put another way, as remnants of off-the-cuff gestures, Boetti's works possess independence; the viewer cannot manipulate the object, but rather must make do with perceiving it as a fixed arrangement. It is true that the viewer is thus confronted with a separate presence, but this is a presence that betrays the limits of Celant's reading through the multiplicity of interpretations it provokes, its vivid materiality, and its paratactic, contrived character. To summarize, the sense of the work as a self-sufficient presence coincides with an awareness of its constitutive instability.

In more politically charged terms, Celant's association of Boetti's art with an exit from "historical and worldly contingency" is systematically blocked in the very materialization of the artist's impulse toward a more liberated existence. His work is not quite representative of an embodied interaction with things as constituting a sure-fire alternative to contingency, linguistic complexity, or the trappings of modern culture.<sup>45</sup> Withdrawing into a world of completed gestures

43. This notion assumes importance as a response to Fascism, which had required the maintenance of a rigid hierarchy between the subject and the social system with which he or she was expected to comply.

44. Umberto Eco, "Form as Social Commitment," in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 153.

45. Boetti's preoccupation with contingency is further supported by his 1974 statement, "It would

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and their perception is only half the story with respect to Boetti. Taken on its own, this model would still not allow the artist to escape the social and political degradations of his native culture. Both the perception of the work's autonomy and its base material determination belong to an intersubjective world.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, there is a persistence of artistic subjectivity in such work, but subjectivity here does not exist *avant la lettre*. Rather, the subject occurs when the field of everyday existence is reconfigured, thus leaving an object in the path of a future perception. This subject is just as thing-like as it is personable and is, in a word, double—in its apparent singularity, this subject remains part of the collective history of the more than one and, like reality itself, exists between coherence and disintegration. It is thus not surprising to learn that Boetti adopted the following name in his various undertakings from the early 1970s onward: Alighiero e Boetti (Alighiero and Boetti).

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be nice if there were two worlds, one wholly conscious, the other wholly unconscious, going along hand-in-hand without ever getting muddled; instead of finding ourselves between the two, with no certainty, monstrously held inside the vast, pain-filled subject." See Christov-Barkargiev, *Arte Povera*, trans. Liz Heron and Gilda Williams (London: Phaidon, 1999).

46. Alex Potts, "Artworks, Utterances, and Things," in *Art and Thought* (London: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 91–110.