

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Alighiero e Boetti

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Alighiero e Boetti
The Difference between
Invention and Exploration
or from
Geography to Experience
with Two Maps



"What we intuit in the medium of art and artistic forms is a double reality, the reality of nature and of human life. And every great work of art gives us a new approach to and new interpretation of nature and life. But this interpretation is possible only in terms of intuition not of concepts; in terms of sensuous form not of abstract signs. As soon as I lose the sensuous forms from sight I lose the ground of my aesthetic experience." ¹

Ernst Cassirer, LANGUAGE AND ART, 1942



Crossing the Atlantic on a recent trip to Europe we were approaching the Iberian Peninsula. Looking down and watching the continent roll under the wing, a sharp line where land meets water; two elements, the fluid and the solid, converging to define the other. From the air, vision and not touch promoted this elemental distinction known only from past experience. The air, as pure essence – transparent, permitting our sight of the landmass to describe an outline, perimeter into the grey-blue broken by a river of contradiction. A moment of transition linking our senses to our thoughts, embraced by the memory of knowledge and experience, anticipated another transition from elemental states of air to land, travel from one continent to another.

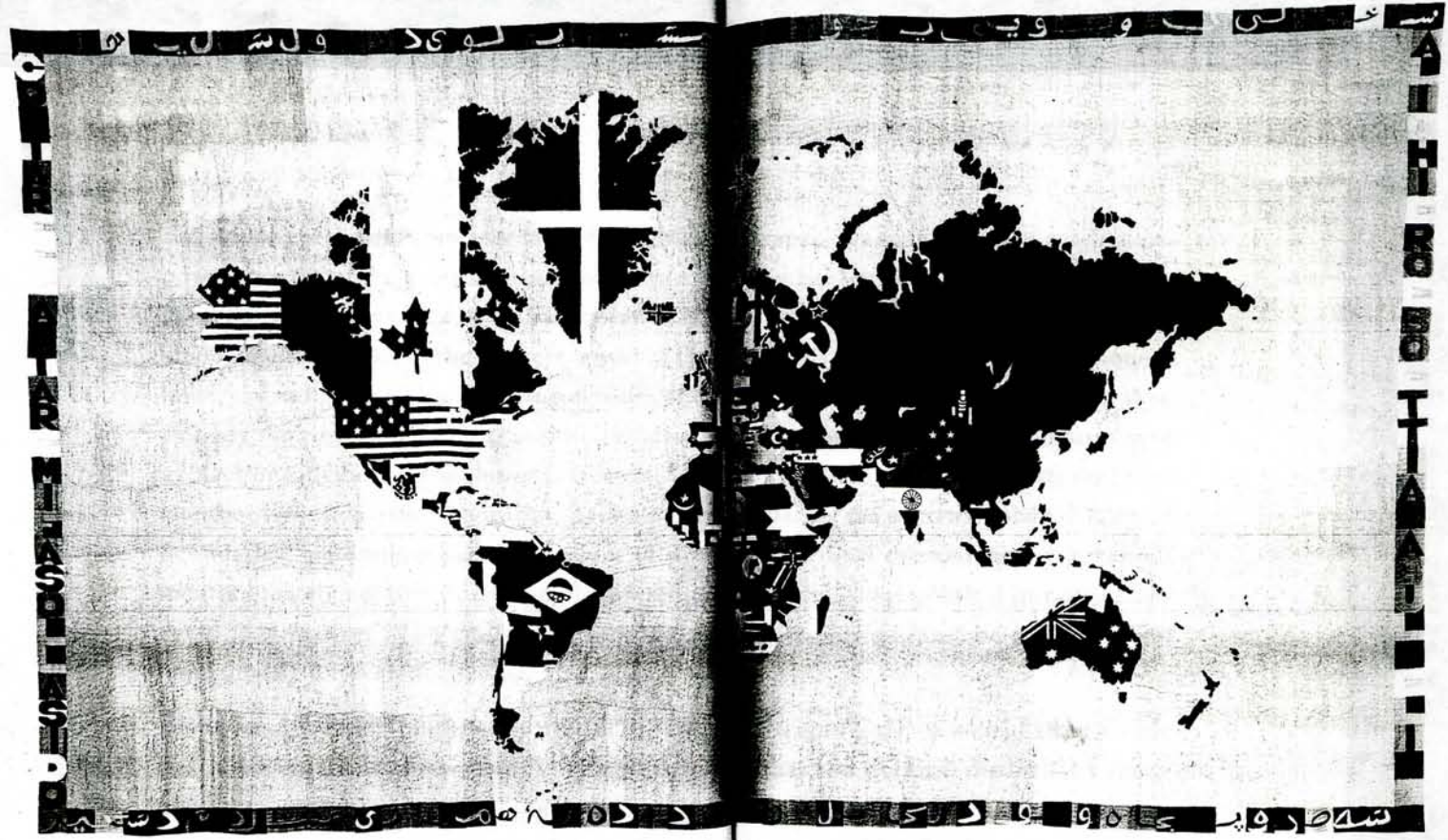
This moment – a place in time – where knowledge is confronted with experience is precisely the moment where one questions the origins and validity of that knowledge. Alighiero e Boetti's *MAP* (1971) of the world raises such epistemological concerns. The picture, which is a broderie, displays the standard geographical forms of the world's continents as we have come to know them through cartography. The outline and shape of the earth's landmasses acquire meaning to us as individuals when we project ourselves bodily onto one location, a point on the planet where we envision ourselves. The cartographical representation, only recently affirmed through man's conquest of outer space, conveys a conception of our environment that no man could physically experience either through travel or touch. A planetary overview, the diagrammatic delimiting of forms, emphasizes outline as the primary feature of the finite. Linear separations, however, state where divisions are made but do not describe how they are made.

With *MAP* Boetti relies upon color, a supplementary differentiating facet of man's visual faculty of sight, and secondarily upon texture to transcend schematic representations of form. The preliminary terrestrial connotations of the map are enriched symbolically through the ascribed colors which summon forth socio-political concerns. By subtly intertwining the social and the physical, realms usually thought of as separate, Boetti underlines their mutually informing similarities. It is initially to the actual physical realm where we must first direct our analysis because how the world looks is different from how the world is.

The multicolored continents are set against a monochromatic irregularly textured blue background. Shimmering differences of surface texture between certain areas of blue seem an incidental consequence of the embroidering method of production. Homogeneous, tightly embroidered parts, as in the bottom left corner, contrast to other less easily definable bands and strips of lighter fabric. And this uneven quality declares an intentionality in the craftsmanship of the labor-intensive fabrication. The issue of authorship, the artist's working hand, is displaced through the deliberate exposure of fabrication methods embodying inconsistencies which relinquish the traditional desire to control process. Authorship attains meaning by focusing on the essentials of creation, origin of an idea and its final articulation. The apparent negligence surrounding creation, carried out by Afghani women and not Boetti himself, contradicts the precisely delineated outlines of the continents. Each landmass is distinctly divided into nationally denotative colors – colors and insignia emblematic of each country – and follows politically established and accepted boundaries. Unlike common geographical maps which display information about the land itself (vegetation, population distribution, elevation, etc.), Boetti's map discusses how man has imposed artifi-

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cial systems of division onto the land. Even though this map overtly pertains to geopolitical power structures, the artist manages to create a visual image which in turn reflects directly upon the political viewpoints he has chosen to take. Like Warhol and Broodthaers, Boetti is among the few artists in the Western world of the late 1960s and early 1970s whose honest, lucid, and radical thinking about social issues offered him no adequate alternative other than a highly sophisticated political position, evidenced in *MAP*, which denied the imposition of explicit or judgmental conclusions. Disregarding the specific nature of conflicts that may alter borders and destroy countries, Boetti, by recapitulating the current globally accepted boundaries, undermines primary notions of steadfast historical determinacy. The various indeterminately colored threads, embroidered to delineate global political infrastructures could, one realizes when confronted with the smooth fragility of *MAP*, be arduously and meticulously unraveled.

In the late twentieth century any map of the earth representing the outline of all habitable continents would seem necessarily to emphasize national and political distinctions above purely environmental ones. Yet precisely through nationalistic signification the viewer cannot help but question the validity of these distinctions, the validity of politics as an apparatus to simultaneously unify and segregate peoples. Boetti's *MAP* heightens our awareness of how internationally recognizable emblems operate. These emblems, featured on national flags, isolate and assert differences that are sometimes vastly disparate yet in other cases similar. The various colors occupying countries supply little rational insight into differences between the countries of the world.

Colors and sign are employed at a multifunctional level, allowing the viewer to visually connect color to color, either complimentary or harmonious. But following historically developed sections of land which comprise nations, Boetti's artistic will is subsumed within this pattern, dismissing the possibility of alteration. By emphasizing these conventional divisions, Boetti calls forth the opposite, the connected nature of humanity beyond any artificially imposed scheme. The arrangement of colors, seemingly bound to willful aesthetic arrangements, reflects subtle yet distinct correlations between history and humanity.

MAP, hand-embroidered as it was in Afghanistan, a remote and industrially non-developed country in Asia, displaces the Western concern for art and individuality. Boetti transcends distinctions between 'first' and 'third' world art, between the refined intentionally aestheticized objects of the West and functional native art objects, by offering an artwork that embodies the conjunction of cultures in its making.² Boetti's artistic action affirms contextual distinctions yet, ingeniously, it does not raise one set of values above another. The presence of the fine artist, who becomes the maker through presentation of the tapestry, is elucidated when the alternating black and white lettering comprising the outside margins of the composition is interpreted.

Crowning the composition, the top line informs us that “Alighiero e Boetti is thinking of Afghanistan,” of special places, like Bandamir, as indicated by the names on the right margin. The left margin which connects grammatically to the bottom line reads, “Alighiero e Boetti in Rome in the first days of nineteen-eighty-four.” These cryptic remarks which link specific geographical locations to the artist and his experience – living in Rome but making frequent extended visits to Afghanistan – signify an awareness of the individual’s placement on the planet. This verbal emphasis, isolating two places on different continents, declares a personal dislocation, the vast distance between the artist and the embroideresses. Further reference to the actuality of separation is made through the reference to time, here the early days of 1984. The presence of time is asserted in the artwork itself when we reflect upon the long hours of embroidering required for completion. Boetti’s reliance upon manual labor for the creation of MAP isolates the human dimension in the forms, which surpass aesthetic appeal connecting potentially abstract forms with reality. That this artwork is produced in Afghanistan, and not in Italy, under the strict scrutiny of the artist, reveals his intention to be accurate without being specific. As Boetti stated in reference to MAP, “The greatest pleasure in the world consists in inventing the world as it is, without inventing anything.”³

In a preceding MAP (1979), Boetti presented a different coloristic conception of his representation by changing one color, that of the oceans, from blue to pink. Although all of the nationally denotative colors in the 1979 MAP are fixed and recognizable, the pink water plunges correlative definitions of color and form into doubt. This earlier MAP differs not only in the color of the water but, more significantly, through its verbal, multicolored margins. Here, a sharp contrast between Italian (Roman letters) and Afghani (Arabic letters) visually announces cultural distance. Boetti challenges the logic of language by assigning each individual letter a specific color and setting each letter against a contrasting ground. Creative composition overwhelms our desire to decipher, transforming the letter into a sign, a sound – not a complete, culturally distinct word, but a form that can be uttered and universally understood.



1) Ernst Cassirer, “Language and Art,” in *SYMBOL, MYTH AND CULTURE*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 157

2) Thomas McEvelley isolates what he refers to as the necessity of finding a “post-colonialist way of exhibiting first and third world objects together.” This request which reflects upon major museum exhibitions incorporating culturally, socially, and philosophically disparate art objects from the third and first worlds bypasses the vital issue of how artists relate to each other around the world. Placing objects in museums does not adequately demonstrate or discount possible connections because contextual shifts overwhelm the temporary contrived environment of western urban museum institutions. (See *ARTFORUM*, March 1990, pp. 19–21, for McEvelley’s thoughts on this topic.)

Boetti, aware of this problematic issue, first focused on it in the late 1960s in a similarly integrative way as MAP. Perhaps it is through cooperation necessarily encompassing some degree of reciprocal understanding that cultural discrepancies and artistic dislocation can be overcome.

3) Alighiero e Boetti in *ALIGHIERO E BOETTI AU NOUVEAU MUSÉE*, Villeurbanne, France: 1986, p. 36