

Barry Schwabsky, "Putting the World into the World: On Alighiero Boetti," *The Nation*, April 3, 2012



Putting the World Into the World: On Alighiero Boetti

Barry Schwabsky April 3, 2012 | This article appeared in the April 23, 2012 edition of *The Nation*.

An artist's career is a chronicle of deeds as much as a catalog of works. Like most artists, Alighiero Boetti occasionally wrote the chronicle himself, albeit sometimes in a jumbled way, as in this autobiographical text from 1967: "In 1948 I tore up a big brown sheet of paper making small quadrangular pieces, which I stacked up and used to erect a rather unstable column.... In 1950 I had about twenty small ice-cream glasses, which I'd collected laboriously, and I fitted them one inside the other so as to form an arch. In the same year I filled a small plastic box with about a dozen match boxes.... In 1949 I rolled up a yellow tape measure and pushed my little finger into it forming a kind of tower of Babel.... The first pile of matches and the first bundle of pencils date back to 1947." The young Boetti's prescience is impressive. During the postwar years, most Italian artists were still wrestling with the question of whether their future lay in the politically committed figurative painting of Renato Guttuso, influenced by Expressionism and the political side of Picasso, or in the various forms of abstract painting then just emerging. That Boetti had made exquisite harbingers of post-minimalist art in such a climate is astonishing, and all the more so because the artist, born in Turin in 1940, would have been a schoolboy.

Reading this deadpan text, in which Boetti seems to attribute the formal consciousness of art to himself at an age when he was happy to play with whatever stray objects or materials were at hand, I'm inclined to think he is lampooning someone. But who? Perhaps the artists of his own generation, who thought that even the most banal activity could be lent aesthetic status just by being documented. On Kawara made that prototypical nonevent, getting up in the morning, into an artistic exercise by mailing a couple of postcards each day rubber-stamped with the legend I Got Up at... followed by the exact time. Similarly, the sculptor Richard Long made a line on the ground by walking back and forth until the grass was sufficiently flattened beneath his feet—and then photographed it. Bas Jan Ader rode his bike into a canal in Amsterdam "because gravity made itself master over me," and took care to have his childish, "accidentally on purpose" stunt filmed for posterity.

Or maybe Boetti is demystifying a deeply ingrained habit—the romanticization of the artist as an elect being whose destiny is heralded in childhood. This tradition goes back at least to the thirteenth century, when Cimabue is supposed to have discovered the young Giotto as an untutored shepherd boy skillfully drawing his sheep. Then again, maybe Boetti's straight-faced humor is trickier than it seems. What if telling a joke is his preferred way of expressing what he really means? After all, in one of his first exhibitions Boetti adopted the seemingly paradoxical epithet "Shaman Showman," and then held fast to the dichotomy—

authentic visionary and self-proclaimed charlatan—for the rest of his life. What if he did believe, or would have liked his public to believe, that his seemingly mundane art was a gift of the gods, and that the artist is the figure elected to remain closest to the spirit of childhood, to the activity of putting objects in order and then constructing a different order with the same objects, conquering boredom by expending energy on boring things so determinedly that they become a source of wonder? After all, Boetti did like making art for actual children. In 1980, a year after he had enlisted a group of kids to color in his drawing *Faccine* (Little Faces), he published a colorful counting game, *Da Uno a Dieci* (From One to Ten). "Zen tales are the only tales that really make me laugh," he once told an interviewer, "and my laughter's like a little boy's." Just as he was both shaman and showman, Boetti was also skeptic and enthusiast, joker and romantic, self-absorbed dreamer and calculating employer. Somehow he manages to make oppositions collapse, probably because he delighted in contradiction.

When Boetti died of a brain tumor in 1994, he was something of a cult figure and still mostly identified with the Arte Povera movement, even though he had begun to distance himself from it a year after the curator and critic Germano Celant proclaimed its advent in 1967. Since Boetti's death, his fame has only continued to grow, and in many ways has begun to eclipse the reputations of artists who seemed more central to Arte Povera. For Celant, Boetti's gestures "appear as an immediate apprehension of every gestural archetype...the cut as cut, the heap as heap, mathematical equations of real=real, action=action. A univocal sign language that expresses 'all the possible formative and organization processes' freed from every historical and worldly contingency." Today Boetti's works look anything but univocal, and that is part of their strength. The figures on the two sides of the equal sign are never reconciled in his art; there are two kinds of real, two kinds of action, just as he insisted that he had to be seen as two, not Alighiero Boetti but, as he later renamed himself, *Alighiero e Boetti* (Alighiero and Boetti), or perhaps a pair of twins, as he pictured himself in a 1968 photomontage.

I don't think Boetti's work has ever been presented in quite so grand a manner as in "Game Plan," an exhibition curated by Lynne Cooke, Mark Godfrey and Christian Rattemeyer, and featuring more than 130 of his works showing the full range of his activity. Currently at Tate Modern, London, through May 27, the exhibition originated at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and will complete its tour at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, July 1–October 1. The show is accompanied by a helpful catalog, and Godfrey has also just published a thorough monograph on the artist, *Alighiero e Boetti* (Yale; \$60). One admirable facet of "Game Plan" is that the presentation of Boetti's work enables a visitor to understand and coordinate the various, sometimes self-contradictory aspects of his activity as an artist. I'm thinking not only of the many types of objects displayed, some of them (postcards, jigsaw puzzles) seemingly antithetical to anything that in earlier times could have been deemed art, some of them (drawings, photographs, a variety of free-standing objects that can by default be referred to as sculpture) closer in appearance to what artists of previous generations had made, and others more like what were once called crafts. What I also have in mind are the different kinds of roles Boetti played as an artist: not only the producer of objects and images but also the initiator of processes and the coiner of thoughts.

But more often than their use as titles, aphorisms were often the actual content of Boetti's work, embroidered in word squares, used as secondary elements in larger embroideries, or detailed in drawings, either those Boetti made himself—using both hands as if they were two different protagonists in a drama, one the Alighiero and one the Boetti—or his “biro drawings.” The latter were executed in ordinary ballpoint pen according to a grid system whereby each horizontal line on a piece of paper represents a letter of the alphabet. The grid was filled in column by column by hired assistants (always one male and one female), except for the portion representing a given letter. The “absences” can be read from left to right, encoding Boetti's drawings with a text that is not evident on the surface yet can with effort be deciphered. Visually, the result is a constantly variegated field of vibratory blue hatchings. As for the texts themselves, they often flirt with self-contradiction, as with *Niente da vedere niente da nascondere*. Others, by contrast, present themselves as tautologies, for instance *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (Put the World Into the World). Whatever can that mean? A slogan later used by one of Boetti's successors, Martin Creed, offers a gloss: “the whole world + the work = the whole world.” The world being infinite, it can be added to without thereby being increased, yet what was present in it has been made more apparent. The pendant to *Mettere al mondo il mondo* is *Dare tempo al tempo* (Give Time to Time). The meaning of this phrase may seem more self-evident, though no less telling for that, a scrap of cracker-barrel philosophy worth committing to memory: devote some of your time to simply observing time pass, and you'll have more of it. Yet Boetti also maintained the opposite. Other works bear the words *Amazzare il tempo* (Kill Time). Of course, what some people would call killing time—spending it on unproductive activities such as contemplation—might be what Boetti means by giving time to time. The last of these is the Boetti who most immediately engages me. This artist is a writer but of a very particular sort, a cross between poet and sloganeer, aphorist and Zen master, finding (when he can) or inventing (when he must) gnomic phrases that could be deployed again and again in various ways. Unfortunately, the writer is downplayed by “Game Plan,” because the embroidered “word squares” in which he arranged the letters of phrases that fascinated him are treated as minor works. Sometimes Boetti's sibylline paradoxes turn up as titles. An iron framework from 1969 holding twelve glass windows and leaning against a wall, as if waiting to be installed somewhere, may look like a Minimalist readymade, but the title given the work, *Niente da vedere niente da nascondere* (Nothing to See Nothing to Hide), lends it an emblematic value that no true-blue Minimalist would have countenanced. Thanks to the title, the work's emptiness becomes full, its transparency clouds over—it becomes a parable. And oddly enough, the parable seems to contradict both the showman, who always offers something to see, and the shaman, whose magic functions in part through secrecy.

In considering other Boetti maxims, I don't know if they are forms of tautology or contradiction, as is the case with *La notte dà luce alla notte* (Night Illuminates Night), a phrase of apparent Sufi origin. Many use puns or other forms of wordplay: *Fuso ma non confuso* (Fused but Not Confused—or Stoned but Not Confused), which undoubtedly indicates the state of mind in which some of these phrases were invented. *Mettere i verbi all'infinito* (Put the Verbs in the Infinitive—or, Into Infinity) simply describes an aspect of Boetti's method in these writings. In a broader sense, so does *Lasciare il certo per l'incerto* (Leave Certainty for Uncertainty), while *Accanto a me ci sono* (Next to Me Is Where I Am) recalls his idea of a duple identity. Others reflect a not-unfamiliar wisdom that shuttles easily between lyricism and irony: *Ciò che sempre parla in silenzio è il corpo* (That Which Always Speaks in Silence Is the Body)—a sentiment found in the writings of Norman O. Brown, the dimly remembered prophet of polymorphous perversity,

whose *Love's Body* was among Boetti's favorite books. *Non parto non resto* (I Don't Leave I Don't Stay). *Bisogna essere leggeri come gli uccelli e non come le piume* (We Must Be Light as Birds, Not as Feathers). One suite of black-and-white panels embroidered with phrases is called *Far quadrare tutto* (Make Everything Fit In or Add Up), but because the title is based on *quadro*, the word for square, which also happens to mean picture or painting, it suggests that everything should be put into a square or become a picture. Boetti has done just that with the phrases, all of them composed of sixteen letters—including the one that gives the suite its title—and therefore eminently squarable.

My appetite for these trippy apothegms may seem inexplicable to some, as may many of the objects Boetti made in a similar spirit, especially early in his career. If the idea of wristwatches (*Orologi Annuali*, from 1977–94) that display only the year, ignoring the hours and minutes, doesn't tickle your imagination as a clever way to remind yourself to give time to time, well, time's up. But Boetti's oblique, riddling notions don't always result in oblique, riddling objects. He never particularly insisted on what Marcel Duchamp had called "visual indifference...in fact a complete anesthesia" as a prerequisite for conceptually advanced work. For Boetti, "Beauty is an expression of thought," rather, "and of the urge to express it."

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Beauty also turns out to arise from putting the world into the world, and what better way to do so than to make a map of it? By the time Boetti started making art, Jasper Johns had already mapped his way into painting, and Boetti's Arte Povera comrade Luciano Fabro repeatedly made the recognizable outline of the Italian boot a subject of his sculpture. But Boetti did not focus on a single country, not even his own, or on mapmaking realized through painting or sculpture. He had already made works using the forms of Israel's occupied territories as motifs, such as 1971's *Dodici forme dal 10 giugno 1967* (Twelve Forms From June 10, 1967). It was also in 1971 that Boetti conceived of commissioning Afghan embroiderers (first in Afghanistan and later, when war made this impossible, among the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan) to produce large-scale representations of the world map, with each country's territory filled in, not by a single color but with the pattern of the country's flag. "For me," Boetti famously said, "the work on the embroidered Map achieved the highest form of beauty. For the finished work, I myself did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that the world is as it is (I didn't draw it) and the national flags are as they are (I didn't design them). In short, I did absolutely nothing."

He continued doing this nothing for the rest of his life. When making his word squares, he often left the choice of colors to the embroiderers; similarly, with the maps he left many aesthetic choices to the Afghans. The edges of the maps are typically decorated with legends in various languages; some were selected by Boetti, including many of his favorite apothegms, but many, in Persian, were composed by the embroiderers, and therefore are illegible to most Westerners. Yet these texts contain urgent messages: Godfrey translates one to say, "The needlework of Alighiero e Boetti an Italian artist was produced in collaboration with Abduljalil Afghan in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan. It is important to note that this work was hand crafted by unnamed Afghan women in the refugee camps in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan. These women had to leave their beloved homes in Afghanistan due to fear from the invading Russians."

The highlight at the Tate is a large room filled with some of Boetti's largest and most elaborate embroidered maps—a concerted blaze of decorative grandeur such as one hardly expects in an exhibition of contemporary art. Boetti's intuition that through such materials and scale he would realize the highest form of beauty is largely verified here. Putting the world into the world, making things without adding anything to what exists—these sound like doctrines of austerity, but in the maps they are formulas for splendor. Boetti came to understand this only in Afghanistan, where he spent much of his time between 1971 and 1979. His love of the country was rooted in the idea that necessity creates conditions for beauty. He wrote that “the villages are built on mountain-sides, so as not to fritter the rare areas of fertile land in the valleys. Nothing is added to the landscape, either. Rocks are moved, and used to build cube-houses (as in Klee's watercolors). Trees are felled to make the frame.”

In the exhibition catalog, Godfrey rightly asks whether Boetti did not “essentialize Afghanistan by treating it as an ideal, an object of desire, a concept rather than as a complex place.” He might also have asked whether Boetti's use of Afghan labor to execute his artworks was not a form of exploitation. The answer lies in the fact that the Afghan people he employed were never simply executing his ideas but drawing on their own aesthetic and culture. The resulting work is a hybrid in which European conceptual art and Afghan craftsmanship, individual authorship and anonymous artisanal work, are overlaid as distinct sets of values that, far from interfering with one another, together create a form of beauty that each would not have separately been able to attain. In this room, at least for a while, everything adds up.