

Ida Panicelli, "Alighiero Boetti ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DI SAN LUCA," *Artforum*, March 1, 2025

ARTFORUM

ROME

Alighiero Boetti

ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DI SAN LUCA

Thirty years after Alighiero Boetti's death, the show "*Raddoppiare Dimezzando*" (Double by Halving) presents some of his well-known and significant works ranging from the famous 1968 photo *Gemelli* (Twins) to the sculpture *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait), made in 1993, the year before he died. But the highlight of the show is a work that has been exhibited rarely since its first installation at Le Magasin in Grenoble, France, due to its monumental dimensions: *Opera postale* (*De bouche à l'oreille*) (Postal Work [By Word of Mouth]), 1993, an ambitious project that the artist conceived at the very end of his human and creative journey. Well aware that illness would not allow him much more time, he intended the work as a summation of his entire life, his production, and his obsessions. It is impossible to avoid the apparent coldness of the numbers that compose it—approximately 130 linear feet, 506 envelopes, stamped and postmarked, and the 506 individually framed drawings on paper that were contained inside them. However, the numbers are part of the appeal of this work and mark its inner rhythm, made up of the contrast between the dynamic composition of the drawings and the geometric arrangement of the stamps on the envelopes.

The first envelope, containing a statement in which Boetti explicates the system that governs the work, was sent from the Louvre Paris post office, and the subsequent ones from post offices on the borders of France, clockwise, including overseas colonies. All bear the letterhead of and are addressed to Le Magasin in Grenoble, where the work was exhibited in November 1993, a few months before the artist's death. While at that time it was presented in linear fashion, here the work spreads over the four walls of the room in a spiral, recalling Mario Merz's use of the Fibonacci sequence: an expanding galaxy of shapes and symbols that might extend infinitely. Every station of this growing organism, formed by the juxtaposition of envelopes and corresponding drawings, progresses according to a succession of numbers from one to eleven, rising in power (one, four, nine, sixteen, twenty-five, and so on), so that, beginning with the initial diptych that includes the first envelope and the first sheet, one arrives at the eleventh panel with 121 envelopes and 121 sheets. This dance of numbers transforms mathematical rigor into rhythm, with a musical resonance that leads to the final harmony.

In the drawings we find recurring elements in Boetti's work: writing done with his left, nondominant hand; inkblots; circles; stamps; profiles of objects; horizontal, vertical, and oblique bands; newspaper pages

copied in pencil by his assistants. His rich vocabulary includes playful, political, and autobiographical elements in a free and spontaneous narration. Everything flows fluidly to present events and memories, as if from an open vein. Amid waves of color, the randomness of the stains, the order and disorder, his hand records his inner states, the here and now, what surrounds him on his worktable. Boetti embraces real-ity, presents it for what it is, but then transfigures it: He lets go of his ego and allows the work to complete itself without him. Like a great director, Boetti sets up this enormous production, conceived in the most minimal details. The entire work emerges from his mind and in part from his hands, but for its fulfillment the artist, in an incredible leap of faith, relies on chance and on the hands of others. The participation of his assistants who affixed the stamps, the postal officials who post-marked and sorted the envelopes, and the museum staff who removed the drawings from the envelopes and framed them occurs on a level of exchange without hierarchy, in an open interaction that is typical of his work and of the work of other Conceptual artists, such as Hanne Darboven or Sol Le Witt. Everything intertwines successfully—intensity and lightness, what is planned and what is unpredictable, together with his gamble with fate and his desire to experiment with a new progres-sive mathematical order when he was already at the end of his life-sowing the seeds of his creativity beyond time.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Alighiero Boetti,
Opera postale (*De
bouche à l'oreille*)
(Postal Work [By
Word of Mouth])
(detail), 1993, 506
stamped envelopes,
506 mixed-media
drawings on paper,
dimensions variable.

