

GLADSTONE

Holland Cotter, "The Whole World, Stitched and Patched," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2012



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Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan A detail from "Catasta" ("Stack"), made out of piled fiber-cement tubes, in the retrospective of Mr. Boetti's life's work, opening on Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art.

LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Whole World, Stitched and Patched

There's a bittersweet addition to the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden this summer. Half hidden in the shade of a tree, it's a life-

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size bronze statue of a gaunt-looking guy holding a fountainlike hose in one hand. When water spraying from it hits his head, steam rises, as if his brain were sizzling. The statue is a 1993 self-portrait of the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti, who died a year after it was made and who seems to have lived his life in a kind of fever delirium of ideas, many of which thread through "Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan," a

magical survey of his art. Part of it is on view in the museum's atrium, with the rest to open on the sixth floor on Sunday.

Boetti was born in 1940 in Turin, the Motor City of Italy and the home of Fiat. He came of age creatively in the 1960s. Influenced by Duchamp, by industrial culture and by a natural attraction to the intricacies of language and arcane systems of logic, he made work that at first was low on formal allure and packed tight with conceptual content.

Certainly the first objects you see on MoMA's sixth floor are far from prepossessing: sheets of printed graph paper; a ziggurat-shaped col-

umn of rolled commercial cardboard; a seemingly half-finished piece of embroidery; a picture postcard of two look-alike men holding hands; a light bulb in a box.

Yet each of these things, or groups of things, is a study in complication, a visual essay on the ambiguities that surround conventional notions of measurement, meaning, value and time. All the printed lines of the graph paper, for example, have, for no given reason, been traced over, freehand, in pencil, firmly here, shakily there, so that a common emblem of geometric exactitude has become

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personalized, like the lines of an encephalogram.

The ziggurat sculpture is tall, and for that reason monumental, though it's also a giant toy, produced through a version of a trick that Boetti remembered performing as a child, when he put his finger in the center hole of a rolled tape measure and pulled upward to create a mini-tower.

The embroidery, consisting of three patches of brown wool stitched by Boetti's first wife and collaborator, Annemarie Sauzeau, on an otherwise empty piece of cloth, looks like a work in progress, though it's as complete as it needs to be. The shapes of the stitched patches are quite specific: they exactly correspond to maps of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip printed in an Italian newspaper at the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

The hand-holding twins on the postcard are easily identifiable as a double portrait of Boetti, who would repeatedly over the years present himself as a dual, left-brain-versus-right-brain personality. He trained himself to write and draw ambidextrously and transformed himself from solo artist to artist-team by adding a conjunction to his name: Alighiero Boetti became Alighiero e Boetti: Alighiero AND Boetti.

Finally, there's the light bulb in the box, a clunky, self-effacing piece that turns out to be the most charismatic object of all. The bulb is programmed to turn on once a year, for a mere 11 seconds, and on a random schedule. Even Boetti couldn't predict when it might light, though the idea that it will at some point do so creates a tension of expectation. Maybe you'll be the one looking at it when the magic moment occurs.

In these early concept-intensive works, Boetti laid out the fundamentals of his career. They include an interest in the concept of natural variation built into repetition and accident built into control; a preference for collaboration (including self-collaboration) as working method; a fascination with geography and the larger world beyond art; and a deep sense of investment, philosophical but also emotional, in the workings of time.

In the mid-1960s, certain features of Boetti's art, notably its use of found and down-market materials, recommended him to a group of Italian experimental artists gathered under the rubric of Arte Povera. Initially, Boetti found their company stimulating and threw himself into collective activities. The MoMA show, organized in collaboration with the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid and the Tate Modern in London, includes a poster he designed in 1967, listing the names of the vanguard "poor art" crew, his own among them.

Within a few years, though, he began to back away, claiming that the Arte Povera work had become materially too showy — "baroque" was his word — and its makers too commercially ambitious. (He tended to affect a contrasting slacker pose, evident in another self-portrait formed from lumps of cement, in which he lies prone on the floor.)

His break with group identity, coupled with his discomfort with the growing violence of Italian politics, propelled Boetti into traveling abroad. Within a relatively short time he visited Africa, South America, the United States and



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Work from the 1990s: From the kilim series "Alternating From One to One Hundred and Vice Versa," top; "Tutto" ("Everything"), left, embroidery on canvas; and a self-portrait sculpture, above.

ing of embroideries, based on specified designs, by Afghan craftswomen.

As a test run, he ordered two small examples, for which he provided text drawings. One spelled out Dec. 16, 2040, in block letters and numerals, the other July 11, 2023. The first referred to the centenary of his birth; the second, to the day he predicted he would die. The embroiderers sewed the dates precisely onto fabric and surrounded them with floral decorations, an addition Boetti loved precisely because he hadn't expected it.

Satisfied, he then began to commission the large embroidered images of maps that are now synonymous with his name. The templates for them were

ONLINE: GAME PLAN

More images from the Alighiero Boetti exhibition:
nytimes.com/design

standardized, printed world maps used in European classrooms. Boetti had tracings of them made, which he customized by filling in the contours of individual countries with the colors of national flags. He then sent the models off or delivered them in person to Kabul, where he had financed a small hotel.

The first completed map embroidery, dated 1971-72, is in the MoMA show and hung toward the end of the sixth-floor installation. It's a splendid, regal thing. The national colors are jewel-bright; the oceans sapphire blue, with stitchwork that seems to simulate the texture of moving water. More than a hundred such embroideries were produced over the next two decades and more. And inevitably the main image varied in details from one version to the next.

Sometimes this was Boetti's doing. Although he claimed little overt interest in politics, he was alert to international news. As nations came and went or shifted affiliation, he updated his map drawings, making radical revisions after the splintering of the Soviet Union. At one point he began to use a new map altogether, one that gave more prominence to the Southern Hemisphere.

The Afghan artisans introduced changes of their own. Personnel changed; levels of skills varied. When embroiderers ran short of a particular color thread and had to substitute another, oceans came out pink, yellow or red instead of blue. Boetti approved of, even treasured, any and all such differences and from the start established the framing borders of the textiles as a free zone, open to all, for religious texts, political commentary and poetry in Italian, English and Farsi.

In 1980, with the Soviet occupiers entrenched and Afghanistan's borders closed, production came to a forced halt. For the next few years, Boetti went through his own crisis of creativity before reconnecting with Afghan artisans in exile in Pakistan. At this point he shifted gears somewhat by ordering, in addition to the maps, a set of 50 kilim carpets, woven by men, with abstract, pixelated geometric designs determined by a complex system of mathematical variables.

The MoMA show's organizer, Christian Rattemeyer, the museum's associate curator of drawings, has placed nine of the kilims on the floor of the atrium, each under a bare light bulb, as if to accommodate a congregation of abstract thinkers, some of them Sufi perhaps — Boetti was very interested in Sufism — for discussion and contemplation.

The walls surrounding the rugs are hung with map embroideries, but also with less familiar textiles, including one from a 1994 series called "Tutto." "Tutto" means "all," "everything," and that's what this embroidery seems to hold. It's crammed, jigsaw-style, crazy quilt-style, with themes and images that weave through Boetti's career: twins, hardware, lamps, letters, towers, continents, abstractions.

Given that it was created the year the artist died of cancer, it could be read as a kind of deathbed vision of past life passing in a chaotic stream before his eyes, though it's just as likely he had another image in mind, that of a great steaming stew of life on the boil, rich with piquant memories and fresh ideas.

"Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan" continues through Oct. 1 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.