

**Alighiero e Boetti**

Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

Generally, the most basic fact about an artistic activity or object is the distinction between it and whatever is not art. But in his artmaking, Alighiero e Boetti (1940 - 1994) was continually demonstrating that he had only ever been making art, even before he was self-consciously an artist, or so it seems from his autobiographical statement of 1967:

"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 1954 I straightened out a piece of corrugated cardboard with a surface area of a square metre. Since 1957, without interruption, I have been smoothing out the silver paper from cigarette boxes. 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 (Biella) and an agriculturalist, I cut, with a scythe, about 3 square metres of grass . . . ."

These works, made by Boetti from the age of eight on up, are presumably not extant. But their emphasis on materials shows a clear predisposition toward *arte povera*, the movement with which Boetti would be closely associated from the time of its naming in 1967. This statement also reflects his fascination with systematic activity, which would mark the more "conceptual" work that would occupy him from 1969 until his death, as in his catalogue of the world's thousand longest rivers, published in 1977. The Whitechapel show was subtitled "The Maverick Spirit of *Arte Povera*," but Boetti was so much the maverick that the *povera* label might have been dropped altogether as too limiting. In retrospect, he has more in common with colleagues like On Kawara (the fascination with time), Mel Bochner (numbers and the relation between order and disorder), and Lawrence Weiner (language as material) than with most of his fellow Italians.

Burdened, as he would later recall, by a studio that "had become like a grocery store," or "a warehouse for materials, full of asbestos, lumber, cement, stones," Boetti resolved by the spring of 1969 to attenuate the physical substance of his work. He began by retracing the squares on sheet after sheet of graph paper, a sort of idiotic labor "without any constraints of time or reason," as he put it, which nonetheless gave rise to a work of compelling beauty and surprising variety. It was a gesture of radical Minimalism, an attempt to "[start] again from scratch" ... although, for Boetti, point zero was never a blank sheet of paper, but rather something that was already distinctly imprinted with the traces of industry and reason. Freedom would be, in a way, "to follow a prescribed path," as Antonella Soldaini points out in her catalogue essay—but only in a way, since Boetti found an infinite number of different paths for his pencil in that simple grid, and his particular choices among them give the work its subdued but irreducible individuality. The grid, suddenly, is no longer only a neutral abstract structure, but also a support for the labyrinth of identity.

Adding the word "e" ("and") between his forename and surname, "Boetti asserted the division of the self, echoing the strategy of doubling by dividing in half ("raddoppiare dimezzando") which he demonstrated in purely formal terms in an untitled cut-paper collage of 1973: A rectangle has been

cut in half, then one of the resulting halves has been cut in half, and so on. The rectangle seems to grow or expand toward the corner where the pieces are smallest, thanks to the multiplication of boundary spaces within it. Nothing more than a childish exercise, perhaps, but then Boetti's work aspires to a state in which childish simplicity and disconcerting complication are confounded.

I imagine Boetti as one of those people (they are perhaps less rare in Rome, where he emigrated from his native Turin in 1972, than anywhere else) who spends his time mostly sitting around, quite volubly doing apparently nothing—but doing that with such concentrated nervous energy that he also seems to be entirely engaged in profound activity. Pleased to portray himself as an exponent of quasi-Buddhist inaction, he explained his world maps, executed by Afghan embroiderers, in which the shape of each country is filled by the design of its flag: "I did nothing for this work, chose nothing myself, in the sense that: the world is shaped as it is, I did not draw it; the flags are what they are, I did not design them. In short, I created absolutely nothing." He merely set a process in motion in order to become the spectator of its result.

Of course, a tremendous amount of labor was invested in each of Boetti's large maps, or in the drawings composed of fields of tiny ballpoint-pen markings (like the stitching in the embroideries), such as *I sei sensi* (The six senses), 1973, on eleven enormous sheets. Only the labor was contributed by others. But to emphasize that would be to paint Boetti as a sort of cross between Duchamp and Tom Sawyer, which maybe, after all, he was. Still, he was always the maker as well as the witness. In the catalogue, Diletta Borromeo identifies twenty-three distinct types of work produced by Boetti from 1965 until his death. The exhibition itself includes just fifty-one items, communicating his range but not representing any single genre in depth. And although nearly a third of them date from 1966-68, that is, the *arte povera* years, it does not misrepresent Boetti's career. In this context, *arte povera* appears as just one of the ideas with which he played, though one that happened to yield many objects.