

# alighiero boetti

## game plan

As acclaim for Alighiero Boetti's art has rapidly grown in recent years so critical attention has shifted from the Arte Povera sculpture that first brought him widespread recognition in the late 1960s, to the embroideries that became the hallmark of his later career. Above all, the world maps that he began producing shortly after he first visited Kabul in 1971 have assumed iconic status. Comprising more than one hundred and fifty examples created over two decades, this series of sumptuous artefacts both charts historical developments among nations and peoples across the globe, and reflects cartographical disputes of a more philosophical order. Given that the design of each country's flag has been superimposed on its terrain, comparison between maps may reveal significant changes in political regimes: compare, for example, the different ways of rendering Afghanistan in the two maps from 1971-73 with the forms used in examples created in the early 1980s, following the Soviet invasion. Other telling differences stem from the choice of cartographic projection (the diagram devised to transfer terrestrial relations as they appear on the spherical globe of the earth's surface into a two dimensional format). While several hundred different projections are available to map-makers today, the Mercator projection is still perhaps the most frequently used.

When Boetti first addressed this subject, in *Planisfero politico* (Political Planisphere), 1969-70, he purchased a map of the kind that is traditionally found in elementary school classrooms and then introduced motifs based on the flags. When he decided to commission an embroidered version from Afghan craftswomen he switched from the *Planisfero's* Mercator projection to the Van der Grinten version devised in the late nineteenth century. Widely used for over four centuries, the Mercator well served maritime travellers but it singularly fails in relating the size of landmasses. Greenland, which always presents a problem to cartographers because its latitude is so far north, is in reality smaller in size than Mexico but appears in



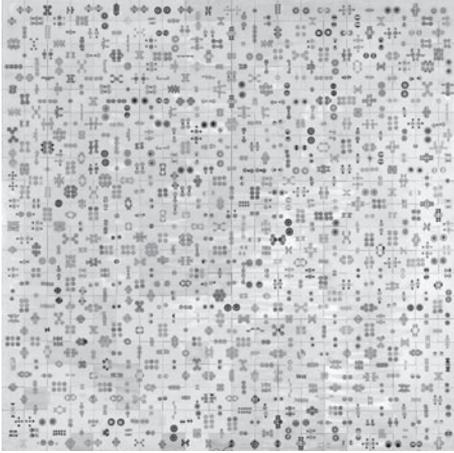
*Mappa (Map)*,  
1989-1991.  
Embroidery on linen  
265 x 585 cm  
Chiara and  
Francesco Carraro  
Collection, Venice

Mercator's rendering to be nine times larger. In the Robinson projection, developed in the 1960s, by contrast, it is only sixty percent larger. Among other contentious aspects of the Mercator is the fact that Western Europe is featured so prominently if inaccurately. In the later

Seventies Boetti reverted again to the ubiquitous Mercator before finally adopting the Robinson projection in the later Eighties. In so doing he re-aligned himself in the intense critical debate that was then spilling beyond the realms of geographers and cartographers to engage sociologists, meteorologists, politicians, philosophers and others who contested the relative merits of the alternative representations in ideological and metaphysical terms. While most sectors of society embraced the Robinson as the best general purpose map on account of its balance of size and shape, and even its formal and aesthetic qualities, others favoured the Gall Peters projection as a corrective to what they considered the former Eurocentric, racist renderings.<sup>1</sup>

In shifting his allegiances among these contending projections Boetti made evident the ways that seemingly objective information, instantiated in scientific schemata and everyday artefacts (like the ubiquitous school map), is ideologically freighted, not value-neutral. In the 1960s Post Modernism challenged belief that Enlightenment

1 See John Noble Wilford, "The Impossible Quest for the Perfect Map", *The New York Times*, October 25, 1988.



Untitled, 1969.  
Ink and stickers on  
paper  
200 x 200 cm  
Private Collection

ideals based in disinterested, rationalist, positivist thought were universal and incontestable, as yet another of Boetti's major works, *Classifying: The Thousand Longest Rivers in the World*, 1971-77, makes clear. Comprised of a book tabulating some six years of scholarly research conducted world wide, and two large embroideries, titled *I mille fiumi piú lunghi del mondo* (The Thousand Longest Rivers in the World), 1976-82, this research-based project attempted to carry out a seemingly straightforward exercise in classification. But, as soon became apparent, the relevant data was often contradictory or unreliable: Boetti's faith

in alternative modes of thought was confirmed. To him, thought, the sixth and greatest of the senses, was humankind's highest achievement, yet the kind of thinking which he most valued was what he deemed thought as 'the Sixth Sense'. A mode of thinking more imaginatively intuitive than rigorously analytical, more poetic than deconstructive, it is rooted in synchronicity, or meaningful accidents, and welcomes chance procedures and aleatory interventions as stimulus to playful speculation.

Boetti provided the embroiderers of his maps with precise instructions, and yet, by permitting them to choose the colours in which the oceans were to be depicted, he introduced a degree of serendipity. Chance would consequently play an ancillary but key role within his predetermined system. When he unwrapped the packages containing the maps delivered to his studio in Rome, he was invariably delighted by the surprising yet wonderfully harmonious choices, of, say, a vivid yellow, silver, or brilliant pink for those areas. On occasion he even discovered unforeseen anomalies; since they did not necessarily picture the world according to western cartographic formulae the women who embroidered the maps did not always realize that certain shapes represented inland seas and lakes and so sometimes failed to colour them in accordance with major bodies of water depicted elsewhere in the map. By Boetti's reckoning his maps were the perfect art works, for he "did nothing": he simply chose a pre-existing motif and commissioned a variant in another material, while tolerating a degree

of unpredictability.<sup>2</sup> His disarmingly disingenuous account of their inception nonetheless greatly downplays the role of the artist: for while his hand indeed had no part in the production of these works, his mind had fully conceptualized them.

Chance was constantly allied with play in Boetti's signature train of thought. Games of all kinds, from the most juvenile to the most sophisticated, were a constant feature of his work. Boards for chess or checkers (including *Dama*, 1967, and *Iter-vallo*, 1969/1986), elementary cryptologies (the untitled works with multi-coloured stickers), jigsaws and related puzzles (the series known as *Tutto* [Everything]) and game books (the folio *Da uno a dieci*, [From One to Ten], 1980) all abound in his vocabulary. Among linguistically-based games are palindromes, puns, oxymoronic and tautological systems, which were inscribed in embroidered squares. Among his repertoire of gnomic and ludic phrases, chosen because they fitted precisely into grids of 4 x 4, 5 x 5, or even larger numbers of components, many (such as "Ordine e Disordine" [Order and Disorder]) epitomize key tenets of his thinking. "I've done a lot of work on the concept of *order and disorder*", he explained in an interview in 1988: "It's just a question of knowing the rules of the game. Someone who doesn't know them will never see the order that reigns in things. It's like looking at a starry sky. Someone who does not know the order of the stars will see only confusion, whereas an astronomer will have a very clear vision of things."<sup>3</sup>

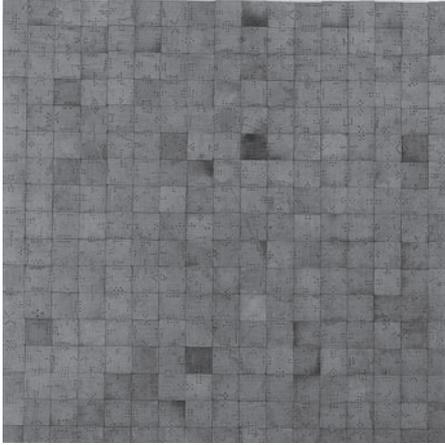
Among related works are the 'biro pieces', in which repetitive gestures in ballpoint pen spell out, letter by letter, such paradigmatic notions

as *I sei sensi* (The Six Senses) and *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (Putting the World into the World). Like so much else in his oeuvre, these works based in rudimentary pedagogical models for spelling, were executed by others: in each of these sensuous drawings, two people, a man and a woman, both unknown to the artist, assumed

*Aerei* (Aeroplanes),  
1989. Ink on photo-  
sensitive paper  
mounted on canvas  
3 panels:  
150 x 100 cm each  
Carmignac Gestion  
Foundation



- 2 Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, "The Adventurous Life of Alighiero Boetti", in *Alighiero e Boetti: Bringing the World into Art 1993-1962*, Naples, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, 2009, p. 233.
- 3 "From Today to Tomorrow," 1988, reprinted in *Alighiero e Boetti: Bringing the World into Art 1993-1962*, pp. 205-6.



*Dama*  
(Chekerboard), 1967  
289 punched  
wooden blocks  
97 x 97 x 5,5 cm  
Gloria Molino  
Collection

the laborious task of defining the phrase in negative.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, other bodies of work, including the *Aerei* (Aeroplanes), relied on the skills of such professionals as graphic designers. While Boetti pursued a practice rooted in conceptual strategies not only did notions of play have a key role, so too did the pursuit of idleness - in literal as well as metaphysical terms. Ways of wasting or spending time served, in turn, to generate works, as seen in the monumental *L'albero delle ore* (The Hour Tree), 1979, based on a drawing in which the artist one day

noted the passage of each quarter hour by reference to the chimes of the bells in a near-by church. At the heart of all these strategies was a refusal of work, beginning with its most obvious guise as manual labour. Like systems for ordering (and disordering), time was crucial, Boetti believed, to being in the world, to life in all its forms. "Time is something really fundamental; it underlies everything", he contended: "It is the only thing that is magical. Everything has its own time".<sup>5</sup> Boetti gambled with time as with much else. In several related works titled "16 DICEMBRE 2040 – 11 LUGLIO 2023" (16 December 2040 – 11 July 2023), he speculated on his fate, both personal and professional. The first of the two dates celebrates the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, while the second foretold the day he would die. Though his premature death in 1994 gave the lie to the latter prediction, his legacy will doubtless be revered in 2040 and beyond. In its heterogeneous fecundity Boetti's seminal work is rooted in philosophical questions that remain pertinent to generation after generation. And the model he limned of a conceptual practice (that engages, as needed, with artisans, amateurs, technical specialists and even children, for its realization) prefigures the complex and sometimes problematic relations through which professional artists today define their roles in a fast-paced global cultural.

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4 The directions and arrangements for executing each biro piece were made through an agent, an intermediary, as was the case with everything Boetti commissioned from Afghan craftspeople.

5 Achille Bonito Oliva, "Alighiero Boetti Interview" in *Alighiero e Boetti*, Vienna, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1997, p. 208.

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Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes  
prior to Museum closing

**alighiero boetti**

game plan

5 October 2011 – 5 February 2012

Sabatini building, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor

**Text**

by Lynne Cooke

**Images**

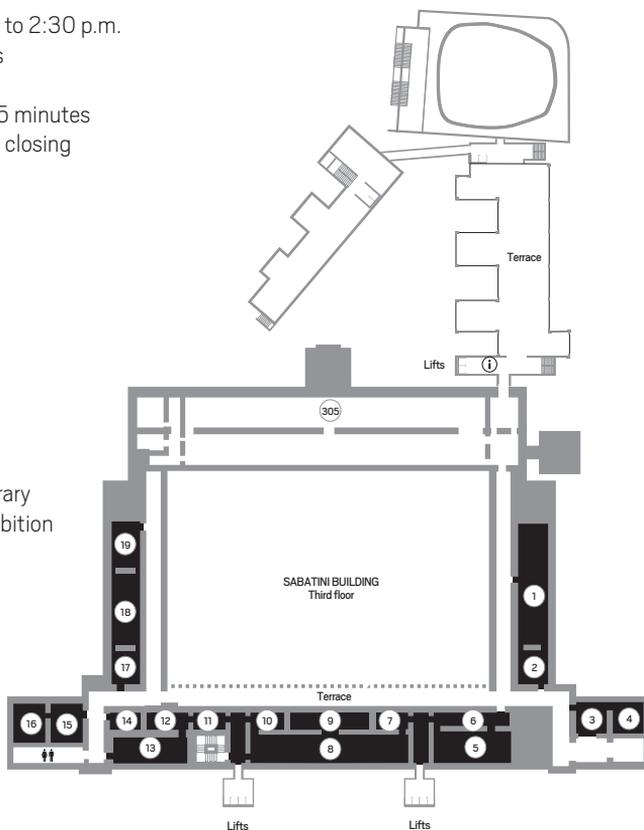
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Suggested itinerary  
through the exhibition



Exhibition organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Tate Modern, London, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York