

AND

Alighiero e Boetti at MOMA

In 1973 Alighiero Boetti changed his name to Alighiero e Boetti. The addition of an 'e' ('and' in Italian) has the simple effect of division. What was one becomes two. The integrity of the self (the purported referent of the name) is split into two halves. He could, however, have split the self otherwise with different effects and consequences. He could have adopted the moniker, Alighiero e Boetti. The conjunction "and" is worlds apart from "or". With "and" what is divided is included, whereas with "or" what is divided is excluded. The formula Alighiero e Boetti is an inclusive disjunction.

The retrospective of Boetti's work, *Game Plan*, currently on view at MOMA places this logic into the foreground. The entrance to the exhibition has a blown up version of the postcard *Twins* (1968) a work that clearly foreshadows the linguistic intervention into his artistic signature. The image on the postcard is a photomontage depicting two figures holding hands that look nearly identical (both are Boetti). In addition to this crass repurposing of the postcard as a billboard style advertisement is the early work *Ping Pong* (1966), consisting of two light boxes that flank each

side of the entryway, flashing intermittently ping, then pong. Even at this early stage, the logic is clear; for Boetti, art is a game of division played with oneself in which each work becomes a new opportunity to multiply the self.

The exhibition plays this logic out across Boetti's divergent output often obscured by his tendency toward overproduction (producing, for example, more or less 150 embroidered maps). The exhibition focuses the work around its essential lines of thought, excising the sense of repetition that threatens to overwhelm the subtle shifts that orient Boetti's exploration of singularity and multiplicity. There is perhaps only one conspicuously absent series of work, the airplane series. From this work of editorial condensation a dominant idea emerges, despite the stress, for example, that the exhibition places on his attempt to distance himself from his early Arte Povera concerns. For Boetti, the greatness of art does not lie in resolving contradictions, but in allowing them to subsist. His work is constantly playing with the tensions between opposites: space and time, singularity and multiplicity, identity and difference, order and chaos, presence and absence. By allowing contradictions to subsist,

the artwork occasions an act of division in the self that complicates what is dominant and what is subaltern, what is known and unknown, expected and unexpected, the familiar and the strange, the personal and the impersonal, as



when a right handed person draws with their left hand: a strategy that Boetti often used. The ambition of the work is admirable.

The work is marred, however, by a tendency toward self-indulgence and mystification as in the bronze plaques, *December 16, 2040* and *July 11, 2023*. The former date alludes to the hundred anniversary of the artist's birth and the latter date refers to the day that Boetti imagined that he would die. Boetti tends to imbue the artist with mystical importance and at times seems to truly believe that the artist is the revealer of mystical truths. One fears that the multiplication of his self results only in its projection; he finds himself everywhere; the world becomes a vast reflecting pool for his artistic gestures.

Yet, this is not a problem that Boetti seeks to avoid. This is nowhere more apparent than in his desire for anonymity, which he sought through collaboration. This is perhaps most evident in the ballpoint pen drawings which strike a masterful balance between rigor and ease of execution, tedium and beauty, sense and non-sense. Whereas in the more well known embroidered maps, it is deceptively clear when the 'other' apparently asserts their autonomy (a choice, for example, of the color of

thread or which text to include); the brutality of the ballpoint pen drawings' execution crushes any romanticization of this kind of work or the autonomy involved. The rift between self and other here becomes excruciating, as does the division between intellectual and manual labor. The work becomes most interesting at those moments when it becomes unclear which tendency is dominant: a tendency towards self-inflation or deflation. In the bronze sculpture, *Self-Portrait* (1993), Boetti wears a suit and pours water from hose onto his head. The bronze head is heated internally which causes the water to evaporate as it makes contact, giving the effect that his brain is smoking. This playful gesture mocks his own belief in his fervid genius that nonetheless subtends much of the work.

Boetti is highly aware that the aesthetic situation sets up certain expectations, a belief that there will be an aesthetic event: the light could indeed turn on for 11 seconds, there could be an illumination, but most likely it will not. The absence of such an event is only registered if one believes that it could in fact occur. This is no doubt what motivates much of the tourist industry and animates aspiring global trotters: the belief that the experience of the foreign will produce a richness and a complexity of perspective that will shatter horizons and open the self up to sources of meaning that hidden or obscured by daily routine and the crushing and overwhelming sense of the normal. Did Boetti believe? Is this what motivated his desire to travel, to establish One Hotel in Kabul? Was he aware that this is nothing but a wanton romanticism

and that tourism depends on narcissism and the human's indefatigable ability to map its expectations onto the foreign? He certainly plays with this belief, with these expectations. And if one knows? Then what? Should one not travel? In the end, the works continued interest lies in its uncertainty and unease, Boetti's willingness to indulge, overindulge, and then nonetheless distantiate, mock; his awareness that art is not merely a game to be played, but a trap. I choose then to read the clasp in the postcard *Twins* not as an expression of solidarity with his self (with his double), but as sinister pact. One never knows whether one's double is a friend or an enemy. Consistent with the logic of inclusive disjunction, Boetti refuses the forced choice of the 'or'; his self is both friend *and* enemy.

-Alexi Kukuljevic