

# Alighiero e Boetti: Paradox and its double

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## *Axometry*

**T**he work of Alighiero e Boetti never resembles itself its original dissimilarity is fostered by the objects through which it is actualized and by the range of its concerns. It is possible to establish not only one, but several centers around which it orbits, laying out in tiers a set of planes whose complex affinities erect an edifice where order and disorder are interwoven, where paradoxes border on tautologies and the abstract and the concrete compete for immediacy. The open-ended relationships between the pieces continuously and unpredictably establish themselves, so that the time appropriated by the edifice secures the cohesion, which seemed to be threatened by the rejection of a basic continuity. It is therefore impossible to take in the work at a glance, not so much because its parts remain invisible, but because a part never stands for the whole due to the vicissitudes of its variations. The best apprehension of this work—ideally integrating its faults as possibilities—would be axonometric, with the transparency of every plane exposed in relation to the whole, eliminating the laws of cause and effect.

From precariously balanced COLUMNS of paper plates (1966) to *Postal Works* (1974) of stamps in apparent disorder, yet actually carefully ordered; from *Ping Pong* (1966) to *Nature: A Shady Business* (1984), we pass from one code or system to another. Each of them proposes a particular way of ordering everyday motifs. Far from being able to determine the work as a whole, these systems are expressly limited to the elements to which they apply thanks to their simplicity and to their particularity.

*“What you see is not what you get”*

In *Postal Works*, 720 letters are stamped each with six stamps in a different sequence. The systematic inventory of the positions does not produce a form, but a singular movement of colored figures, contained within the mirror relationship between the first letter and the last. This process establishes a mirror principle that does not reflect any exteriority and thus frees the space of movement. The permutation conceals its result so well that it is impossible to say which element has a more active role: the system or the envelopes. We are confronted with boundless dividing lines between topics that invade the work and to which there is no proposed solution. The positions are reversible, the mimetic and specular dimensions coincide: all

this turns the visible into a field of transformations that escapes visual grasp. What is seen at first glance is not what is shown, and as an inevitable corollary, what is shown is not necessarily what is to be seen.

This evasion of the visible is not the subject of an underlying credo; it takes place each and every time it appears in the extreme actuality of co-presences. Paradoxically, the code becomes even more opaque when an interpretation is given in the form of a title or an inscription. The commas that indicate the letters of the alphabet on two panels covered with strokes of ballpoint pen organize the title of the work in vertical columns: *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (1973–79). There are irreducible disproportions between the nature of the code and its message on the one hand and its purpose and its mode of transmission on the other hand, so that there is no performance: the world is an interiority without an envelope. Its manifestation, as it is given here, precedes any imagining consciousness, any will for representation. The coded language can then sink into the ubiquitous but elusive referent.

Through the dysfunction of the code and the induced disproportions, *Mettere al mondo il mondo* introduces us to the uncanny relation of the world to itself, brought into itself by an indescribable operation, born and still to be born in its constant virtuality, beyond reality and beyond revelation. This perception of the world is possible because Boetti's art is not based on Manichean oppositions. Language, image and number are virtualities that modify opposition in varying degrees and can stretch logic until opposites meet. At the same time the cross-hatching, the stamps and commas never become prisoners of their signifying functions: they are also abstractions and operate as such. The interdependence of the contraries and the short-circuits of abstract and figurative dimensions weave an imaginary net which constantly threatens to trap the visible.

*"Thinking means your eyes hurt"—F. Pessoa*

*Niente Da Vedere Niente Da Nascondere* embodies a visually utterly insoluble riddle. The metal framework divided into twelve squares and framing twelve transparent panes of glass offers only its immeasurable presence, indifferent to any event, function or logic. The two clauses in its title should be antithetic; if there is nothing to be seen, then something must be hidden; if nothing is hidden, something must be seen. The panel of glass proves that this is not the case, despite the logical laws that govern the intentionality of our contemplation. The autonomy of this work makes it much more disconcerting than a ready-made. Irrevocably devoid of metaphorical reference, it exposes itself in subtle objectless literality. Certain manifestations of contemporary art have sought to denounce the foundations of art through self-reflexive and self-critical practices, but only within the narrow parameters of the history and representation of art. The concept is therefore illustrated within the ideological and/or pictorial constraints that such usage implies.

Conceptual art starts with art to deduce from it certain concepts whereas Boetti starts with everyday materials to end up with something that turns out to be art. In terms of the production and the purpose of art, this feature fundamentally distinguishes Arte Povera (with which Boetti has been associated since his beginnings) from the Anglo-Saxon practices of the same period.

Boetti is a special kind of inventor: he is not interested in the outcome of his products, but in the vast potential of their inherent applications. By going through invention, Boetti—a model traveler and game-player—achieves reification of the mental world thanks to an undefined alchemy that is not determined a priori. The fact that his works always start with moments of reality and not with reality itself enables him to ignore adaptation, to avoid transcendence and formalism, to strengthen the availabilities and to give thought a temporal dimension.

*Annual Lamp* (1966) is a simple black box with a big bulb under a pane of glass. The bulb lights up once a year for eleven seconds. The probability of seeing it lit is extremely reduced in practice, but still operative: perception, no longer conditioned by the visible, becomes an immanent component of the time in which it unceasingly takes place. *Annual Lamp* is not a memorial work; in fact, it ignores the event that it embodies. Neither does 1984 bring back any memories. Boetti eliminates any event or image value that these magazine covers might have and turns them into sweetened marks of passing time that no longer exists. This work is not the least iconoclastic or polemic: the images presented by the media inexorably acquire new meaning as signs, just as signs (numbers, letters, words, etc.) conversely acquire the status of images.

#### *Tautologic, the double*

Half way between the symbolic order and the code of signals, the flags in MAPPA (MAP, 1971) establish a rapport with the countries they represent through a short-circuit which eliminates all dimensions in favor of a literality very close to that of *Niente Da Vedere Niente Da Nascondere*. Standing for countries and fitting their outlines, the flags fill up the world with one of its most elementary realities. The invention might seem notably undervalued here. But reproducing the world as it is, still enlarges the field of invention, freed of all its limits as it moves, against its nature, towards tautological: everything is then still to be invented.

*The Thousand Longest Rivers in The World* (1970/77) is an ensemble of works including a book and two tapestries, executed over a period of many years in Afghanistan. The thousand names with classification numbers march by in closed ranks of computer-like writing. Names of rivers and rivers of names, these tapestries embrace the whole world, seen this time as a large irrigated expanse that now belongs exclusively to the imagination. The rivers are one in their variety. Their geographical and nominal spread does not detract from their continuity: the world

is flow. Bachelard writes: "It was a perversion to salt the oceans." This polymorphous work mimes the classification of the human sciences. Having researched the rivers in geographical institutions all over the world, Boetti has chosen to class them by length. In addition to dealing with inconsistent figures given for the same river, a rigorous classification must take into account the changes of names, the places where a tributary joins a principal river, etc. As a result, classification often has to resort to arbitrary decisions and the sequence which at first glance seems to be impeccably ordered is actually so distorted that in some cases the book and the tapestries do not even coincide.

Order and disorder are much more than just interdependent; although they are not equivalent, they mutually and hermetically contain each other, as illustrated by the series *Ordine Disordine* (Order Disorder, 1973), which consists of a hundred embroidered panels with the letters "ordinedisordine" mixed up together in random sequence. Here, the contraries disperse in a mimetic dimension: the world itself is in chaos. But chaos faces up to chaos in an endless mirror where order becomes the double of disorder. This partition of the world is enough to register the latter in imaginary infinity, where mind competes with vision. There is only one infallible way to overcome contradictions and paradoxes; they must be immersed in the constant double of the world. The double is not a gesture, nor an attitude, nor a process, but an instance of transformation and re-creation which separates the thing from its image redistributing the two in new relationships and giving to the first the essence of the second in a movement of endless interchangeability.

In the work of Alighiero e Boetti, the double does not have the nature of a simulacrum, but of a reality that it has appropriated. This reality is achieved not only through an extensive use of mirrors, but above all, through imitation and tautology which forces the original unity to adopt an open, critical and ironic economy in place of our rigid systems of representation. Similarly, inventions, paradoxes and tautologies are not defined by dialectics alone, but go on transforming and being transformed beyond themselves and beyond their objects. Through contradiction and imitation, art transforms realities that are all reversible - with one exception that is essential to Boetti's work: the art of imitation precludes the imitation of art.

Translation from the French:

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Published in German and English,

*Parkett*, no. 13, 1987, pp. 6-21.