

**SIMON
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BACK

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Alighiero e Boetti



Alighiero e Boetti
Strumento musicale
(Musical instrument)
1970
Black and white
photograph
50x60 cm

MADRe, Naples, Italy

A visit to this retrospective of work by Alighiero e Boetti, who died in 1994 at the age of 54, began on the top floor of MADRe (Museo d'arte contemporanea Donnaregina). On emerging from the lift, viewers found themselves confronted by a large reproduction of a black and white documentary photograph of the performance *Oggi è venerdì ventisette marzo millenovecentosettanta* (Today is Friday 27 March 1970). In pencil on a white wall, starting with the letter 'o' of 'oggi' (today), the artist had written this sentence in two directions, mirroring each other, extending to the full length of his arm span.

The image introduces two key motifs of Boetti's work: identity and time. In 1968, the artist sent a gift to around 50 of his friends of a photomontage composed of two different images of him holding hands with himself (*Gemelli*, Twins). Then, from 1972, he introduced the 'and' between his first and last names and adopted this new 'signature' in all his artistic activities. Time is also a fundamental component of Boetti's work - both in terms of content and as the creative force that contributes to the realization of a work.

Taking the two directions indicated by the artist's open arms as a starting point, the show's curator, Achille Bonito Oliva, offered

gallery-goers two possible routes through the exhibition: visitors could choose to follow a clockwise or an anticlockwise path through the rooms that stand around the museum's central courtyard. In either case, the chronological order of the works proceeded from the artist's most recent pieces to the oldest, before moving back to the more recent work. The centre of the route, mirroring the start, became a new possible beginning in two other directions, unfolding a sense of circular time, in homage to Boetti. In fact, if chronological and linear time leads us to death, circular time, by offering us the possibility of eternal return, leads to the suspension of time itself, and perhaps to immortality.

This circular movement also echoes the creative career of an artist who, in his productive methods and in the content of his work, began with singularity and doubled it to arrive at multiplicity. The progression from himself to others (or vice versa) reflects the artist's unending curiosity about the world of phenomena, its variety and multiplicity, its principles and systems of classification, and his aim to promote complexity and difference.

Whatever route the visitor chose to follow through it, the exhibition successfully avoided indulging Boetti's tendency to hyper-productivity through an overloaded display. The trajectory of his career - from the final works he conceived but never saw completed (the last of the 'Mappe Ricamate', Embroidered Maps, 1989-92) to the very earliest works dating from 1962 - is instead articulated by means of a rigorous selection →

of around 70 works. The result was a perfectly paced itinerary, enriched by the inclusion of some works, such as *Colonna* (Column, 1968), that are rarely on public view.

Linking Boetti's short-lived career entirely to the Arte Povera movement, as is still sometimes done, is an interpretive shortcut that doesn't respect the uniqueness of a practice that, in terms of its profound manifoldness, has few equivalents in Western postwar art. (Andy Warhol and a few others come to mind.) If the exhibition had a shortcoming, it was that of swinging to the other extreme in this regard: it didn't pay due attention to the sculptural works from the period of 1966 to 1968 that are actually related to Arte Povera. In these works Boetti unites a variety of references, adopting an ironically speculative approach: from Conceptualism to Minimalism, from Anti-Form to Pop. Already with confidence and originality, he anticipated the themes and preoccupations of future years.

Nonetheless, Bonito Oliva's curatorial approach and his catalogue essay demonstrated his profound understanding of Boetti's work. Above all, the exhibition successfully presented the way the artist combined short bursts of creative activity to devise the work with a lengthy process of largely delegated realization. After his second trip to Afghanistan in 1971, Boetti began to involve others - often large groups of people from diverse cultures - in the manufacturing of his works, adopting an approach that today we would call 'outsourcing'. (Hence the decision to substitute an ampersand for the 'e' (and) between the artist's first and second names in the title of the exhibition, as though the artist operated as a business.)

Like a game involving numerous players, Boetti's diverse collaborators were not simply hired hands, but became the source of a series of chance additions to the artist's original concepts. By expanding the scope of his practice in this way, the artist - undoubtedly influenced by oriental and Islamic philosophies (above all Sufism) - set aside his individuality, multiplying and 'diluting' it (as Boetti himself loved to say) with the infinite possibilities of a group creation.

Adopting a conceptualist and post-Structuralist language, Boetti made deep fissures in this analytical framework in order to re-appropriate elements that had been removed: individual, context, history. The political nature and contemporaneity of his work propose an opening up to the other and to difference. That this alterity is represented on more than one occasion by Islamic and Afghan culture in particular, does little but confirm the foresight of Boetti's take on the world.

Luca Cerizza