



Alighiero e Boetti &
Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

Worlds Envisioned

Essay by
Lynne Cooke

Worlds Envisioned brings into dialogue the works of Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti and Ivorian Frédéric Bruly Bouabré. Selected in consultation with the artists, the works in this exhibition highlight certain affinities and congruences that inform their art notwithstanding their very different cultural backgrounds. Both may be described as cosmographers, individuals with an encyclopedic curiosity about the world, and a fascination with the systems, codes and schemata by which such knowledge is recorded, archived, coded and classified. Yet equally binding is the wry, ironic fantasy which enables them to imbue their findings with beguiling poetic resonance.

On March 11, 1948, Bruly Bouabré was the subject of a vision that persuaded him to seek to fix and transmit the knowledge of his people, the Bété, and of the world at large. To that end he invented a pictographic alphabet with some 440 characters in order to provide the first written script for the Bété language. He then began writing books in which he both developed his philosophy and sought to set down the lore, traditions, and knowledge of his native peoples. After acting as an informant for some years to French ethnographers researching his and other West African tribes, he determined in the late 1970s to become an artist and continue his mission. He adopted a format for his work at once simple and immensely flexible: visual images surrounded by a textual border are inscribed in pen and colored pencils onto small tablets made of cardboard. Grouped together in ongoing, open-ended series, these works function as both informal archives and poetic expressions. Tellingly, Bruly Bouabré did not adopt Western art forms as they have been and continue to be taught in West Africa, nor does he follow traditional or indigenous models and styles. Instead he has evolved a manner of outline drawing, which distills and abstracts motifs to basic forms in iconic compositions.

With his omnivorous curiosity and unshakable belief that the world is decipherable, Bruly Bouabré responds to everything he encounters, major and minor, visible and invisible, as “signs of a cosmic harmony set in motion by the creator.” He has therefore adopted a plethora of roles--mystic, divinator, poet, moralist, storyteller, humanist, ethnologist, sociologist, and political commentator, amongst others. *Connaissance du monde (Knowledge of the World)* forms the thematic focus of one great group of his drawings; an alphabet, the basic linguistic tool, that of another; and numbers, as enumerated on the fingers in one of the oldest and most universal of systems, yet another. A classification of systems of mensuration, as found in Akan weights, of sexual practices (among animals and humans alike), and of patterns of kinship as revealed in the practice of scarification, constitute the sources for yet others. While based at times on the practices of his people, the Bété, these works are not in any narrow sense confined to them. For as anthropologist and art historian Yaya Savané argues: “The existence of a universal kinship, the

unity of the world, and the necessity of cultural crossbreeding constitute the foundation of the artistic project Frédéric Bruly Bouabré holds dear.”¹ Thus, kinship, together with the possibility of initiating or affirming familial relationships operates for Bruly Bouabré irrespective of geographical, cultural, and anthropological belonging, just as certain visual languages may communicate beyond the boundaries of specific times and places.



If in the mid-sixties his first works as a mature artist linked him to the burgeoning Arte Povera movement in Italy, Alighiero Boetti soon displayed a fascination with conceptual systems and with rational, and nonrational intellectual structures, which rapidly infused his work with a singular tenor. In 1968 in a celebrated gesture he created, via a postcard, a duplicate image of himself, a double whose hand clasped his in a gesture of unity: this twinning was reinforced by the simultaneous change of his name to Alighiero e Boetti, Alighiero and Boetti. Duplication, the

extension of the self beyond the singular; the desire to divert the focus away from the artist as a unique individual toward a more open-ended practice that constantly sought the hands of others as its conduit, its means of realizing its conceptions and insights; are fundamental tenets of Boetti’s vision. In a related manner, certain forms of preexisting information--maps of the world, proverbs and idioms, number systems, taxonomies and international news, have been mined as raw material.

Just prior to his death in April 1994, Boetti spoke again of a project to write a history of the world for the use of children in every country. A humanist by inclination, he was by temperament too ironic, and too anarchic to be an idealist. If a certain history of our times may be read through the dispassionately presented compendium of miscellaneous magazine covers taken from a single year, *Anno 1990* is nevertheless a record of the momentous and the trivial, the ephemeral and the durable, the profound and the insignificant, presented indiscriminately, without hierarchy or preferentiality. Likewise, the task of determining the thousand longest rivers of the world, as with any analogous type of scientific enquiry, taxonomy and classification, proves far from easily determinable: the information is rarely decisive, fixed, and unassailable; just as within order there is always disorder, yet disorder too always conceals its antithesis. It is not incidental that the grid, a kind of game board, is both a structural determinant and a recurrent image in Boetti’s art. With its checkered structure, composed of hard and soft, ephemeral and durable, light and heavy, assembled in the most simple yet demanding exercise of agility, *Iter-vallo* is a quintessential Boetti work. Devotee of arcane, recondite knowledge as well as of the obvious, the immediate, and the quotidian, Boetti sought to embrace all. The brilliant amorcellated field of writhing shapes, fluctuating and unfixable, provisional and yet inclusive, and ultimately unknowable of *Tutto (Everything)* offers a suggestive counterpoint to *Connaissance du monde*.

¹ Yaya Savané, “Frédéric Bruly Bouabré and His Artistic Project,” in *Worlds Envisioned: Alighiero e Boetti and Frédéric Bruly Bouabré*. (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1995).