Worlds Envisioned
Alighiero e Boetti
and Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

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The works of an Italian and a West African (Ivorian) artist, formally dissimilar, were interspersed in this exhibition as if both had been pursuing the same project. To be sure, the artists had met and had written complimentary words about each other. They had intended to do a collaborative piece for this show, but Boetti died before that could be realized. It is not certain how much the artists really had in common; but their juxtaposition in the exhibition and in the thoughtful catalogue that accompanied it was audacious and instructive.

Alighiero e Boetti emerged as part of the Arte Povera movement of the 1960s, then turned to exploring the constraints and freedoms of the grid and became an idiosyncratic systems artist. He published a photograph (Twins) of two images of himself holding hands and inserted an ‘e’ (and) between his given and family names, as if to signify a double persona. Always interested in the Other, he set out for Guatemala in 1970 but arrived in Afghanistan, where with Afghan friends he became owner of a Kabul hotel. After the Russians invaded he had many works executed as tapestries and kilims by teams of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Some of these are world maps partitioned into countries represented by their national flags. Others spell out the words ‘order and disorder’ in English or Italian; an element of disorder may, for example, be seen in the chance selection of color schemes by the weavers. Clearly Boetti has been interested in moving beyond dichotomous systems in these pieces to some third, possibly mystical, state.

Bruly Bouabré is a religious iconographer steeped in his culture, that of the Bété people of the Ivory Coast. He also had a French missionary education and worked with the French bureaucracy before independence (he was born about 1923, as compared with the younger Boetti’s birth date of 1940). His entire production is done with pen and colored pencils on cards the size of postcards; most of these cards consist of an emblematic line drawing surrounded by a framing line and an explanatory text. Bruly Bouabré has invented a Bété pictographic alphabet based partly on local scarification patterns and the symbolism found on gold weights. He is a cosmographer and ethnographer determined to use the former colonizer’s use of writing to preserve the oral Bété culture against inroads of the alien written one. In this he brings to mind Ogottommeli, the elder who in the 1930s confided in Marcel Griaule some secrets of the esoteric Dogon cosmology rather than see them lost. But Bruly Bouabré is more than a cosmographer. His work, which in its uniqueness belongs fully neither to Bété nor European culture, is quite as enigmatic as Boetti’s.

Should the joining of these two artists, then, be seen as a reprise of the discussion begun around the ambitious ‘Magiciens de la terre’ show at the Pompidou Center and La Villette in Paris in 1989, which brought the work of fifty Third World artists and fifty western artists — including both the Ivorian and the Italian — under the same roofs? That exhibition met criticism on grounds that relations between the two groups of artists’ works could not escape being infected by the historical power relations between their countries, and that the curators’ initiative in focusing an ‘appropriating gaze’ upon other cultures naively perpetuated old strategies of domination. André Magnin, who co-curated that show, had introduced the Italian to the Ivorian artist in 1993; Boetti, with his wife and son, had visited Abidjan and had continued with Bruly Bouabré to the village of the latter’s birth. Both Magnin and Lynne Cooke at the Dia Center, who co-curated the present exhibition, have avoided the issue of how former colonial relations might have affected
present rapports between the two artists, preferring to treat the catalogue as an art work — more precisely a collage made of fragments from 20 museum directors, curators, artists and academics — to be interpreted by readers for themselves. My reluctant conclusion is that on decolonization issues, this exhibition does not advance beyond 'Magiciens'.

The curators might have acknowledged the residual disproportion of power between the two artists without turning the catalogue into a polemic. Like 'Magiciens', the exhibition was organized by the Western curatorial establishment and held in their premises rather than in the small temple of the Order of the Persecuted in Bruly Bouabré's home village of Zéprégühé. Bruly Bouabré's cards had been taken from their plastic storage sacks in that temple and individually framed in glass, then hung on the Dia Center's walls in rows several hundred at a time. By reading between the lines of the catalogue we may be able to surmise the asymmetrical relationship between the two artists. Boetti was a major player in the Western art game, an artist who became interested in systems and — by exercising a Catholic and whimsical temperament — their deconstruction. Bruly Bouabré, largely self-educated, followed the precepts of a prophetic vision (in 1948) and began to collect evidence of God's intelligibility through His systems. He deduced the meaning of what he collected, while Boetti, agnostic, disrupted the meaning of his work by teasing out its ambivalence. The unco-optable, unassimilable qualities of Bruly Bouabré's work evidently fascinated his curators, who were nonetheless obliged to call him an artist. This pleased Bruly Bouabré, who was well schooled in trickster strategies from West African folk tales and knew how to use the foreigner's ways to his own advantage. He was nonetheless sincere in addressing Boetti as 'brother' and in praising his 'African qualities', although this merely confirmed
Boetti’s place on the side of good (Bruly Bouabré dichotomously divides the world between good and evil) and paid Boetti the compliment of assigning him a role in his cosmology.

To Boetti, the works of Bruly Bouabré do not primarily play the art game but exploit austerity in order to penetrate to some metaphysical bedrock.

This poverty of means, like theiressentialness, precludes any bluffing or fraud... Collected, these cards make up a game, like playing cards, a naked and unknown game, a deck of cards for describing the world, and for communicating with it.

Indeed, the works of both artists contain an unassailable surplus of meaning which seems to both presuppose and transcend binary logic. Both are collectors of signs, which they attempt to integrate into systems with, however, different intentions. Both express an interest in marginality in terms of frames and borders. Both are characterized by great good will and generosity of spirit, and if spirit is given primacy, perhaps the two artists are not so different after all. As Jean-Christophe Ammann puts it, paradoxically, ”Order is to disorder as chance is to necessity, seeking to finding, similarity to difference, dream to sleep, and emotion to reason.”

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