

**Alighiero Boetti &  
Frédéric Bruly Bouabré**  
***Worlds Envisioned***



This exhibition, a joint project between the late Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti and Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, a seventy-year-old artist from the Ivory Coast, was comprised of works by each of the artists. The works borrowed from Boetti cover a span of the past twenty years, and were primarily embroidered work (woven in Afghanistan to Boetti's designs) including maps, the "1000 longest rivers," and small works. Also included were new work produced by Boetti in Abidjan shortly before his recent untimely death. Bruly Bouabré's work takes the form of small drawings on 4" x 8" cards, grouped into sets of 50 to 100 on such topics as scarification, the alphabet, cosmologies, etc. Books and manuscripts by the artists were on view as well.

## Checklist of Works



### Alighiero e Boetti

1. *Iter-vallo*, 1969. Iron and tissue paper, 37 x 37 inches. Collection Agata Boetti, Paris.
- 2a. *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo* (*The Thousand Longest Rivers in the World*), 1977-85. Embroidery on canvas, 99 x 211 inches. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Ronald S. Lauder and Purchase, 1993.
- 2b. *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo*, 1977. Book, 8 1/2 x 6 3/4 inches. Edition no. 373/500.
3. *Faccine colorate* (*Colored Faces*), 1979. Felt-tipped pen on printed paper on canvas, six panels, each 39 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches. Archivio Alighiero Boetti, Rome.
4. *Mettere il mondo al mondo* (*Putting the World into the World*), 1972/73. Ballpoint on paper on canvas, 2 panels, each 59 x 98 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome.
5. *Numeri da uno a dieci* (*Numbers from One to Ten*), 1980. Watercolor on paper, ten panels, each 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches. Collection Caterina Boetti, Rome.
6. *Ordine e disordine* (*Order and Disorder*), English version, 1986. Embroidery on canvas, 199 pieces, each 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gallery Eric Franck, Geneva.
7. *Anno 1990* (*The Year 1990*), 1990. Pencil on paper on canvas, twelve panels, each 39 1/4 x 39 1/4 inches. Collection Caterina Boetti, Rome.
8. *Mappa* (*Map*), 1971/89. Embroidery on canvas, 118 x 236 1/4 inches. Collection Caterina Boetti, Rome.
9. *Mappa* (*Map*), 1993-94. Embroidery on canvas, 118 x 236 1/4 inches. Collection Caterina Boetti, Rome.
10. *Tutto* (*Everything*), 1991-92. Embroidery on canvas, 83 3/4 x 163 3/4 inches. Collection Anne-Marie Sauzeau, Rome.
11. *Regno Animale* (*Animal Kingdom*), 1977. Pencil on paper, 59 x 39 1/4 inches. Collection Anne-Marie Sauzeau, Rome.
12. *Regno Musicale* (*Musical Kingdom*), 1978. Pencil on paper, 59 x 39 1/4 inches. Collection Anne-Marie Sauzeau, Rome.



## Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

13. *Etoiles de mes rêves (Stars from My Dreams)*, 1989. 8 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches.

14. *Le Musée du visage africain (Scarifications (The Museum of the African Face [Scarifications]))*, second version, 1991-92. 112 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches or 6 x 3 3/4 inches.

15. *Connaissance du monde (Knowledge of the World)*, 1982-94. 195 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches or 6 x 3 3/4 inches.

16. *Les Chiffres de la comptabilité (Numbers for Accounting)*, 1989-90. 9 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches.

17. *Relevés des signes observés sur noix de cola (Readings from Signs Observed on Cola Nuts)*, 1981-94. 55 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches.

18. *Relevés des signes observés sur oranges (Readings from Signs Observed on Oranges)*,

1988. 36 panels, each 6 x 3 3/4 inches.

19. *Alphabet Bété (Bété Alphabet)*, 1990-91. 449 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches or 6 x 3 3/4 inches.

20. *Zacrô Zêpê*, 1990. 51 panels, each 12 1/2 x 6 1/2 or 6 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches.

21. *Semence de la vie (Seed of Life)*, 1977. 23 panels, each 12 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches or 8 3/4 x 12 1/4 inches.

22. *Poids Akan à peser l'or (Akan Weights for Weighing Gold)*, 1989-90. 36 panels, each 3 3/4 x 6 inches or 6 x 3 3/4 inches.

All works by Frédéric Bruly Bouabré from the Contemporary African Art Collection, Jean Pigozzi Collection.

All works ballpoint pen and colored pencil on cardboard.

23. Books by Frédéric Bruly Bouabré. Collection of the artist.

## **Selected Bibliography**

### **Alighiero e Boetti**

Alighiero e Boetti. (Exhibition catalogue). Basel/Stuttgart/Vienna: Wiese Verlag, 1992. Essays by Annelie Pohlen, Achille Bonito Oliva, et al.

Alighiero e Boetti, De Bouche à Oreille. (Exhibition catalogue). Grenoble: Magasin-Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1993. Essays by Adelina von Fürstenberg, Giovan Battista Salerno, Angela Vettese.

Origin and Destination. (Exhibition catalogue). Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1994. Essays by Marco Colapietro and Giovan Battista Salerno.

Parkett 24 (June 1990). Essays by Jean-Christophe Ammann, Alighiero e Boetti, Jean Pierre Bordaz, Rainer Crone and David Moos, Friedemann Malsch, and Giovan Battista Salerno.

### **Frédéric Bruly Bouabré**

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré. (Exhibition catalogue). Heidelberg: Edition Braus and Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, Kunsthalle Bern, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and Ludwig Forum für internationale Kunst, Aachen, 1993-94.

## **Biography**

Alighiero e Boetti was born in Turin in December, 1940, and died in Rome in April, 1994. He exhibited widely in Italy and beyond from the late sixties and was the subject of a retrospective in 1992 that traveled to Bonn and Münster, Germany, and Lucerne, Switzerland. His works can be found in major museums and galleries throughout the world.

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré was born in Zéprégühe, near Dalou, in the Ivory Coast in 1921. After undergoing a transforming vision in March 1948, he first invented an alphabet then began writing books on diverse subjects mostly in the form of bilingual French/Bété texts. In the late seventies, he began to work as an artist, and since the late eighties, has exhibited his drawings in Europe, Africa, and Japan. This is the first exhibition of his works in North America. He lives and works in Abidjan.

## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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*.

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

## Images

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