



THIS:THAT INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

FOR NO GIVEN REASON

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In 2017, on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore (an offshoot of Venice that is more building than land, more Monet muse than grounded place, a Palladian church floating full of Tintoretto ecstasy), Corey Drieth and William Wylie visited *Alighiero Boetti: Minimum/Maximum*. This exhibition, a retrospective of and meditation on the Italian conceptual artist's largest and smallest works, was held at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini. It contained a special project by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Agata Boetti entitled *COLOR = REALITY. B+W = ABSTRACTION (except for the zebras)*. Drieth and Wylie stood over a photocopier which would spit out red paper with black ink, in a room lined with hundreds, thousands of black and white copies, the product of what Obrist described as Boetti's "feverish" work with the medium.¹ In that room, with that printer, they engaged with each other, with Boetti, with you, the viewer of this exhibition, the reader of this text. They placed their fingers against the glass, felt its light, and created a patterned set of prints, a series of notations, a starting point of eleven sheets of paper, a score, a project, *THIS:THAT*.

Like sheet music to be interpreted, an arrangement for an orchestra or instruments, the score Drieth and Wylie created brings together their disparate parts to form a unified, engaging whole. A score is also the end number of points achieved after a match, one that indicates a game or bout has taken place. But a score, musically, is not the performance. And a score of a game is not the match itself. It's beginning and end, call and response. It's both this and that.

The score itself, created in that room on that red paper with black ink, was a playful pattern, inspired by Boetti's own sense of play and games. It was a call and response; one artist pressed one finger (one) then the other pressed one finger (two) then the first pressed two fingers to the other's remaining one (three) and then the other placed down a second finger (four)... This went on, counting from one to ten until all five fingers of both artists were pressed and copied creating a series of numbering dots. The final page, the zero marker, left blank, where they removed their hands, created a total of eleven sheets.

The score was not a work of art unto itself. But with its birth, Drieth and Wylie created rules for a game that had already been totaled. Each artist would make an artwork every month throughout 2018, except December. The rules for their game were simple, the score was simple. The art Drieth and Wylie created can be viewed and experienced knowing neither rules nor score. But the guiding information that directed their ultimate purpose is withdrawn and inaccessible to all but the artists. The point of their game has no given reason.

When attempting to describe the work of Boetti for a 2012 retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, critic Holland Cotter wrote:

Yet each of these things, or group of things, is a study in complication, a visual essay on the ambiguities that surround conventional notions of measurement, meaning, value and time. All the printed lines of the graph paper, for example, have, for no given reason, been traced over, freehand, in pencil, firmly here, shakily there, so that a common emblem of geometric exactitude has become personalized, like the lines of an encephalogram.²

Cotter wonders at Boetti's line making, the freehand which can in equal turn be firm and shaky, exact and personal, to where it resembles not man or machine, but the invisible electrical impulses created by man, made visible by machine. Boetti fluctuates *for no given reason*. This phrase fluctuates through my

mind *for no given reason*. It is to say that Boetti is in full control and has his reasons, but we are not privy to them, they are not given to us. No reason given.

When does the reason not given matter, when does it add interest? Do you need to have the reason, the impetus, of the exhibition given to appreciate *Set Piece (January)* by Wylie? The digital inkjet print on paper is striking in its red against black, its seeming pattern for us to gaze at and wonder. Is it for no given reason that the artist flipped the original score upside down for a more cascading, flowing feel? How that original was manipulated and layered to form a single pattern determined by the position of the fingerprints? That one page was left out, not twelve but eleven? That blank space in the grid is something both Drieth and Wylie thought about, they thought about together without knowing that either was thinking about it at the same time.

The number of sheets was fitting, as Boetti studied numerology and was especially captivated by the number eleven. For example, Boetti created *Lampada annuale (Yearly Lamp)* in 1966. The single light bulb housed within a mirror-lined wooden box randomly switches itself on for eleven seconds every year. Drieth and Wylie skipped December, keeping the number of months and works at 11 for these same reasons. In addition, the individual numbers of 2018 add up to 11 ($2+0+1+8 = 11$).

Some reasons are given. (And I am here to give them to you.) In January, Drieth wanted to understand the sequence of the fingerprints in the score as a mapping and a material. In *Black Grid Map (January)* he constructed a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch grid of graphite lines across black construction paper and mapped the original score using red “sold” stickers.

Both mapping and mirroring are in line with Boetti’s work, which included his many *Mappa*, where he explored notions of duality and multiplicity through travel, place, and geography. He was obsessed with symmetry, which included symmetry of location. Artist Francesco Clemente, a friend and mentee of Boetti’s, recalls how he had moved to Rome from Naples, while Boetti moved to Rome from Turin. He explains how Boetti teased him “for going south [which] meant to get away from order and ambition and power and going north meant looking for ambition and order and power, and so our movements were symmetrical and complementary.”³

Boetti may have been interested in the symmetry or order of power and ambition, but also reveled in lack of control, of disorder. Of his *Mappa* he wrote, “For that work I did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that: the world is made as it is, not as I designed it, the flags are those that exist, and I did not design them; in short I did absolutely nothing; when the basic idea, the concept, emerges everything else requires no choosing.”⁴

There are reasons not given, and then there are no reasons, no choosing. (Or is to choose to not choose a reason in itself?) To allow the artist his reasons without asking them is a privilege. To create work for no reason, to create work for a reason. This and that. Can you do both? Can you make art for no given reason?



Fig. 1

Repetition (Differences that Make a Difference)

Sianne Ngai writes, in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, that conceptual art can be understood as “a body of work... preoccupied with the modern relationship between individuation and standardization and committed to exploring the tension between ‘existence and doctrine’ by staging various clashes between perceptual and conceptual systems.” Conceptual art, for Ngai, is “interesting,” and the “interesting,” as Mikhail Epstein argues, tries to “bridge the gap between reason and surprise, at once rationalizing the improbable and extending the limits of rationality.”⁵

And yet we only see the final product, not the act of creation. We don’t see the process that explores distinctions between percept and concept. These rules are withheld, and consequentially we experience variations on themes, distinct yet subtle differences that emerge from seriality. We see slight variation of line, of color, of trace. To begin to understand the rules of the game, the conditions of their creation, to perhaps begin sensing the given reasons without them ever clearly stated, is to create “interest.” And this interest makes conceptual art what it is: “merely interesting.” Ngai explains that the “merely interesting” is exemplary of artists like Sol LeWitt and “marks a tension between the unknown and the already known and is generally bound up with a desire to know and document reality.”⁶ The work has rules we may or may not know, guiding actions that we (and the artists) may or may not know, and these actions tend to be “serial, recursive, variation-based projects.”⁷ The interesting and conceptual art, Ngai tells us, have something to do with *information*, the most basic unit of which can be understood, to use Gregory Bateson’s famous definition, as “A difference which makes a difference...”⁸ Every act of repetition is also a production of a difference—or, for Bateson, an idea. The process of repeating the rules, and yet generating something new each time, is the very foundation of a cybernetic model of thought, and is one of the things that, Ngai shows, is foundational for the aesthetics of conceptual art.

For Drieth and Wylie, seriality and repetition were central to their project. For example, not unlike Boetti’s lines in *24 Hour Piece (September)*, that were both smooth and shaky, described by Cotter above, Wylie brings together man and machine to create the interest of differences that make a difference. The work, in which Wylie applied his red-inked left and right thumb prints every hour over 24 hours onto seismic graphing paper (used to record earthquake activity), shows us varying sizes of the trace of the artist. What difference is here? What given reason? The size of the thumb print was determined by a commercially purchased template. What goes untold? While the passage of time charted by the work appears as constant as the motion of the earth, it was created on the final day of the month, rushed, and inconstant.

The most striking similarity between the works made by both Drieth and Wylie for their project occurs in the month of May. What rules brought the two artists into alignment here, the fifth month of the year? What unknown “for no given reasons” make them entirely different?

The works, *Spray (May)* by Wylie and *Red Negative (May)* by Drieth both show the fingerprints of the score in red against white, although Drieth’s is horizontal with eleven sheets given and Wylie’s runs vertical with a twelfth sheet bearing the collaborations seal (WW:CD) and a stamped date of when the work was completed (May 25, 2018).

Wylie’s prints drip, as Drieth’s do, down the white page. For Wylie, they drip because they are made of spray paint applied to Japanese rice paper. The paper is beautiful, delicate, used by young children to practice their Kanji. Wylie has collected this paper to make his marks, which are sprayed through a catalytic converter – a freehand copy of the original score. The artist has a large collection of these

auto parts, which he finds on the road. Again, when the rules, created perhaps for no given reason, are revealed, more interest is created. Red fingerprints against white paper become the traces of auto parts on practice-pages. (What is it to use a car to replicate your own fingerprints?)

Drieth's red prints are neither made directly by his own palms, nor are they sprayed through automobiles. Yet they are created mechanically. The artist printed them out onto heavy watercolor paper, so that they drip as Wylie's do. The red ink bleeds, soaking into the paper, appearing like blood on or through gauze. The difference that makes a difference is materiality. This differing difference is given for a reason, as materiality was extremely important to Boetti's practice. Early in his career, he was loosely associated with the Arte Povera movement which believed in a return to simple or unconventional objects and materials to explore or dismantle concepts of space, language, and symbolic meaning.

As previously mentioned, Boetti worked with photocopiers throughout his career, and in many ways Boetti's use of the photocopier and his obsession with symmetry, order, and disorder, place him as a forerunner of the information art movement. According to Hans Ulrich Obrist, his "passion for communication technologies (such as the Polaroid or the fax machine which, in the 1980s, introduced a combination of mailing and photocopying)...show(s)...that Boetti was a kind of analogical version of the Internet. He was a search engine and anticipated Google with analogical means."⁹

Echoing this techno/ana/logical means of production, Drieth created *Toner Dot Grid (February)* in which he used Microsoft Word as a design software. Using only this word processor he abstracted each page of the original score into a series of dots and ran each design through a toner printer. Much like the Venice copies that originated the score, these were printed on black and red, with a final printing of dot configurations over these grounds eleven more times.

This buildup of data, a hallmark of information art, is also apparent in Wylie's *Filter Piece (March)*, in which the artist printed the score on mylar sheets. Unhappy with this outcome, he stacked a complete set of the scores on top of one another, and made a single print from that stack. There are eleven filters in gelatin print paper in photography, so making use of the 5 filter down to the half, he exposed all eleven sheets for the same amount of time (11 seconds). It is almost impossible to see these slight variations, and yet the stack of grids, the pile of prints creates an astounding design, cosmic and universal.

This reuse and buildup, again, was a hallmark within Boetti's oeuvre. For example, *ONONIMO* (1973) appears as a familiar eleven sheet line-up of deep enveloping blue velvet paint. It is, in fact, ballpoint pen on cards, in which the artist drew and drew and marked and marked with a simple blue pen to achieve this richness.

Boetti was a proponent of "non-invention." Everything in the world is potentially useful for an artist and rather than creating anew, how can one bring what already exists in the world into the work? With a pen? With a fingertip? What else?

Wylie explores materiality and information through his use of found materials as well. For example, the paper used to practice Kanji in *Spray (May)* or xerox copy paper on found receipt pages in *To Give and to Have (July)*. In *Front and Back (February)* Wylie used a ledger book he found in a factory in Amalfi to create pigment prints on its copy receipt paper. The carbon copy backside of these pages reminded him of a Boetti pattern, and so he took up the score onto this front and the back created a black and white carbon copy black side, inkjet print smearing, black space repeating. And again, with a calendar found

in a paper mill off the Amalfi coast in *Counting in Mayan (October)* he used red and black circles and squares to echo the Mayan counting system onto copy paper on the 1943 calendar page from October. In *24 Hour Piece (September)* he again uses found paper, this time the long roll with gently curving graphed lines of seismographic paper. Every hour, for the entire day, he pressed his thumbs against the paper in red ink. Why? Why does he run his fingers against paper meant to indicate the strength of an earthquake; the traces of which become the disordered rumbling earth within his own day even as those fingers create a perfect and satisfying order all their own for no given reason except that time goes on and he lived on that day, and showed us that he lived, and that red looks beautiful and striking, and that getting to live for an entire day on this earth and having the time to press your fingers into the space of that time is a blessing and a curse so enormous that to give a reason for doing so would be neither this nor that.

While Wylie uses found objects, heavy with the weight of their place and time and history, to create his charts and graphs and games, superimposing new order onto their defunct (dis)order, Drieth is doing the same and opposite (this to that). In works like *Red Grid Outline (June)* and *Red Grid Weave (September)* Drieth takes the non-place lightness of simple materials like construction paper and graphite to impose his own interest and order, rigorous rigor into them. Drieth, not unlike Boetti, is captivated with the “simple poetry of materials.”¹⁰

In *Red Grid Outline (June)* Drieth began again with the score, began with red and began with a question: how can you take a previous work of art and transform it into another piece? Not here to be inspired by the this or that of the score, but to take up the score, remake it anew in the old way? Drieth played a game with himself in which the goal was to draw a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch graphite grid on red construction paper, leaving the location of the fingerprints from each page of the original score as $\frac{1}{2}$ by $\frac{1}{2}$ empty spaces within the grid. The this: the score, the game, same as before with fingerprints spaced out in the call and response and number and order, copied mechanically to reach eleven sheets. The that, the difference making a difference, Drieth drew the black against the red by hand, a graph he made with graphite, leaving only the space of the fingerprints blank. He was to do this for all eleven sheets perfectly, and if he drew a line astray, he began again. He had to complete each page in one sitting without erasing anything, completing it perfectly. The interest of this story is what should make you look, the conceptual draw of the drawing is what pulls you in. This red construction paper marked by that hand, again and again and again.

And again: for *Red Grid Weave (September)* Drieth took up his machinic task of black graphite against red construction paper anew. I implore you to look at what he made with his hands, stopping only at the points where he his hands first touched this entire work of art. This: the weave of graphite against construction paper again and again, where it becomes not construction paper but laminated woven fabric, a placemat to keep sticky fingers off a precious place. That: the only empty spaces remaining untouched is what he first touched. Untraceable traces, halting right where his own fingers set the pattern those own fingers must now refuse. Is this order or disorder? Is this maddening or satisfying? Would you rather look or know? Interest or touch? This or that?

There is no this without that. We all need something to bounce off of.

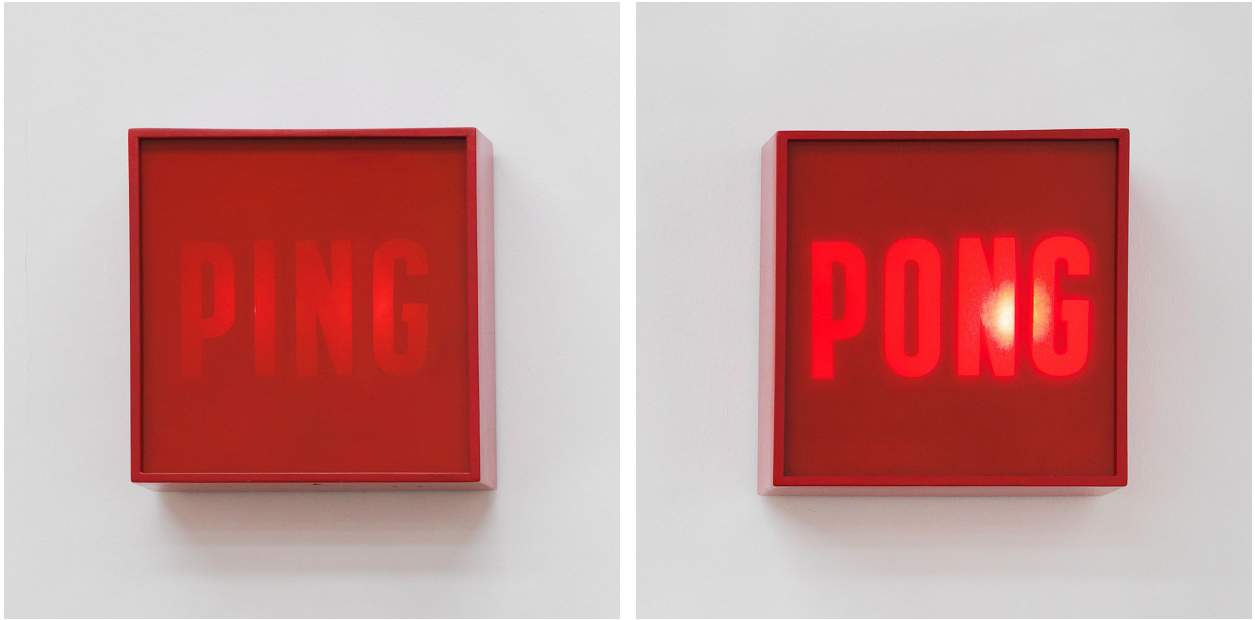


Fig. 2

Ping/Pong (Collaborative Twins)

Speaking of bouncing, a work by Boetti, created in 1967, consists of two light boxes, each is red with white text, and they light up one after the other, taking turns, bounding back and forth. Click, light on: PING, light off. Click, light on: PONG, light off. PING PONG, they move back and forth (usually displayed across a doorway to even further give the illusion of movement and action). Ping and pong, the words denote the sound of action. (The Chinese “ping pang qiu” provides an onomatopoeic precedent for the English name, and luckily the original, “whiff whaff,” didn’t stick. Where is the action in that? All whoosh of misses, no hits.) No one can play a productive game of ping pong alone (that would be all whaff, indeed). Wylie and Drieth have taken up Boetti’s call to action, they hold the paddles aloft (but put them down to press their prints against the glass of his copy machine). (Ping, the fingers press, pong, the light of the machine flashes against them, ping, the paper pushes out, pong, the artists collect them, ping, they agree to a score of new work, pong, you are here now reading this...) Drieth and Wylie collaborate with Boetti and with each other (and with themselves, their own self-imposed rules and games). *THIS:THAT* is their ping to his pong.

Boetti was known for working collaboratively and much of this collaboration involved work with Afghan woman. Boetti traveled extensively across, and lived within, Afghanistan, operating the One Hotel from 1971 until the Soviet invasion in 1979. Many of his collaborative *Mappa* works were created during this time, with local artisans, as were his *Arazzi*. These embroidered word squares, full of gridded letters, are playful word searches or linguistic Rorschach tests. Critic Roberta Smith claims that they, “the mysterious embroidered arazzi –word squares...are among the most intensely eye-catching of all Conceptual art...They are so similar yet always different.”¹¹ Drieth has created his own version with *This: That (April)* in which the words “this” and “that” are arranged to also seemingly reveal, among a plethora of options, “ahhh” and “shit.”

Boetti was also known for collaborating with himself. How can this be? Boetti transformed himself from solo artist to one-man collaboration by adding an “e” to his name; from Alighiero Boetti to Alighiero e Boetti (Alighiero and Boetti). He also learned to write and draw with both hands, and insisted he was both right and left brained. His photograph (which was later published as a postcard) *I Gemelli / Twins* (1968) shows him in a scenic tree-lined path grasping hands with himself.

Those grasped hands, which seem so corporeal and firmly held, become an undoing in Wylie’s *Twinning (April)* where he takes up his Japanese exercise book pages once again to combine them with the original hand-made score created by both Drieth and himself. Their hands are cut into small squares and arranged into a checkerboard pattern. Who can twin and who can win within this space?

Can you collaborate with an artwork? Can you collaborate with yourself? Or is that just playing games? What is the difference? Is there one? Let us look for the difference that makes a difference in these rapports. You can play a game with yourself, and you can never help but work with yourself. (But also, don’t we all have moments in which we work against ourselves?)



Fig. 3

Word Games (Fort/Da)

You cannot truly play ping pong alone. It's fairly egalitarian, but what intimacy can egalitarianism bring? You might be playing with someone more interested in playing the game than in playing with you. The potential for neurosis is vast. Someone will be a better player, someone will win. Someone will walk away and there will only have been a ping and pong between you. You shoot out unreturned pings. (Is this not the basis of sonar?) But there are many things you can do alone; live alone, dream alone, be alone. Sigmund Freud tells us that this may only be survivable if we go through the motions of fooling ourselves into believing we have control over the eventually returned pong. We can ping and ping and ping – and it's up to us when the pong resounds. He shares the story of his grandson, who would take anything he could get his hands on and throw it away from him, into a corner or under a bed, so that the adults in his life were constantly occupied with picking up and hunting for those toys. "As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn out 'o-o-o-o-o' accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction."¹² He was not alone, and his volleys were always returned. One day, the grandson threw a cotton reel out of his crib (crying "ooh") and his mother retrieved it (he cried "aah"). Freud interpreted this as "fort" and "da," "there" and "gone." (Ping and pong.) The psychoanalyst asserts, "There is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act." He says this game transforms an unhappy situation (one in which the youth had no control over his parents or the world) into a happy one, where the parent is at their beck and call. Eventually the young boy began throwing the cotton reel out and pulling it back all by himself; alone.

This calculated risk, throwing something out into the world (out of your world) to see if anyone will retrieve it is fraught, not just for the sake of a game (a ping and a pong) but for the sake of collaboration, a this to a that. Throwing a toy (fort da), transporting a work, an idea, a rule, a demand (ping pong), creating twin call and responses (this that).

One way in which this call and response is performed almost every day, an example that is seemingly banal but still fraught, is mail. Posting a letter, a package to someone you care about, sending it out into the world, to be received or not, to be acknowledged or not. It is also, like pulling your own cotton reel back and forth, a way of marking your space in the world, leaving a trace. Boetti did this with his series *Viaggi Postali*, beginning in the summer of 1969. He mailed envelopes to fellow artists, family, and friends but used fake addresses and forwarded the returned envelopes to more faux places. In this way, he collaborated with those he cared for and admired, sending their names and his messages to them around the world on imagined vacations. Throughout the 1970s he also worked with mail by arranging stamps on envelopes in different patterns, and mailing postcards with images of his hometown from locations around the world during his travels.

Several of the months in which Wylie created work for *THIS:THAT* were homages to Boetti's mail and postage creations. In *From One to Ten (June)* he designed and commissioned postage stamps from a maker in Germany. The stamps had a total of five designs: photos of Wylie's right hand holding up his fingers from one to five. The work from June positioned the stamps on paper to replicate the making of the original score.

In *Mail Arazzi (August)* Wylie used those same stamps to create a corresponding lettered code. The code was determined using the number of fingers represented on the stamp to indicate a corresponding letter of the alphabet. Since there were only five stamp designs, the code starts over after five and repeats itself. Using this system, Wylie designed eleven envelopes containing eleven messages. On the outside of the envelope, the message was created by the coded hand stamps. Within the envelopes, the

message was spelled out in text on a card. Each phrase had the same number of characters determined by the space of the envelope and included “moment to moment” and “order and disorder.” For the entire month of August, Wylie mailed the letters to himself (at his home address of 1111) while he traveled. In homage not only to Boetti’s conceptual work, but also the work of Sol LeWitt, some of the envelopes were mailed from LeWitt’s home. The act of mailing these envelopes, along with their handling and canceling by the USPS, all contribute to their final appearance, part of their intended materiality. (Even the USPS stamps become important, as they were special edition stamps issued to mark the 2018 solar eclipse. When touched, by fingers like those that touched the glass of the copier, the stamps change color.) The workers of the USPS become collaborators among Wylie, the postage stamp maker, and those from whose homes Wylie mailed the envelopes themselves.

As Wylie mailed his mail in August, sending his pings across the world, Drieth, that same month, created his own game with an impossible pong. Wylie’s work from the ninth month of year is returned to us covered in scratches and dirt and fingerprints from all sorts of people, sorted through machines, shoved into boxes, dropped and scooted and bent and broadened. *Board Game (August)* by Drieth is a beautiful, untouched, and untouchable thing: a board game that can never be played. It is made of wood and atomized paint, which creates a velveteen surface that would become scratched and marred at first contact. This is fine, because the game has no rules, its empty black void a painted felt that cannot be felt, while still holding the echo of the original score. It has five red pieces, for five fingers. (Fingers that can look but not touch.)

Drieth has created many games within *THIS:THAT* and is very interested in self-played games (ping, ping). He recalls the adage “he who plays alone never loses.” But can you ever play a game alone? (Pong, pong.) Even a game played by one is designed, was thrown out into the world by its creator for you, and you play it by their rules (or lack of rules), with them in that way. Boetti states, “I am a creator of rules and I let others play with these rules.” (Ping, pong.)

Drieth also designed games to be played by both artists, games to be played by others, including gallery workers, and collaborated on the design of other games still. In *Probability Game (October)* he constructed two custom cherry wood dice boxes which contained a ledger, black pen, two custom Gemini die, with their sixth face left blank, and a set of instructions. The instructions explained that the work was to be played by both artists, and the object of the game was to roll the dice in the boxes until each roll matched the number of fingerprints on each page of the original score. Every incorrect roll was sequentially recorded by the artists in their ledgers. Two matching sets of a game, played at a distance, by these doppelgangers with their Gemini die.

Following *Probability* came, in the eleventh month of this work, *Improbability*. This game designed by Drieth – *Improbability Game (November)* consisted of eleven dice boxes, each containing a number of dice matching the number of fingerprints on each of the score’s eleven pages. All eleven boxes, together, create one game to be played over time by someone other than the artist. That person must throw the dice in each box until all land with their single pips facing up. The game begins with the box containing one die. After successfully throwing a one, the player then moves on to the box with two dice. After successfully throwing two ones in a single roll, the player moves on to box three, and so on. The game ends when the player throws ten ones in a single roll. The dice will remain in the boxes once successfully rolled, completing the artwork.

While this had strict rules, *Card Game (March)* again was a game with no rules. Drieth abstracted each page of the original score into a series of dots and made them into playing cards. For every dot, he made an equal number of cards. The additional AB:BA card corresponds to Boetti’s wordplay (AB = Alighiero

Boetti, and with his *Arazzi*, since ABBA can mean father in Hebrew, among other symbolic associations including “baba” as father).

When it comes to Fathers, Freud also sees the fort-da game as a game of revenge – a way to tell the parent they aren’t so important, that they must always come when beckoned. Fort-da, then, is a calculated game of revenge, but it must happen in a safe situation. If one’s toy isn’t returned then one’s world is shattered, and who would take that risk? Collaboration is exciting and fraught, but really who would throw their toy out into a world they don’t know, at the feet of someone they cannot trust? It’s about trust and control and making your world bigger by taking that calculated risk, that calculated risk and revenge, the revenge of not being alone and having someone tied to you, like the wooden dowel to the cotton thread.

Hands and Remnants (What is Left?)

Having a hand to reach out to, as Boetti reaches out to himself, and Wylie and Drieth stamp their own hands to connect with one another (and then cut those hands apart to create a grid which resembles a game that may or may not be played alone or together apart), is a valuable thing. In *Opposite Twins* (November) Wylie ends the shared project in its eleventh month with the black and red of the original photocopied score, with the hands that made that score, this time stamped and covered with ink pressed against a paper page. The page is signed and stamped with their collaborative seal. And *this* end compared to *that* start; the digital print from the mechanical one is a repetition with a difference, “information” as digital, binary code, rather than the difference of digits marked by light from a photocopier.

There is so much excess within a hand, within a fingerprint. Of course, a fingerprint can be a portrait, and has been used as an index of identification since at least 200 BC, found in Babylonian contracts and ancient Minoan tombs. They can identify our identities, but also diseases we may carry (a study found that women with six or more whorls were at a higher risk for breast cancer, congenital blindness could be indicated, and A-B ridge counts tend to be lower in those with Schizophrenia). We leak from our fingertips all over this world. The secretions in a fingerprint can indicate metabolites present in the body; a smoker’s fingerprints contain nicotine metabolites; there can be coffee traces, cannabis, more.

THIS:THAT is full of interest, full of information, full of reasons given and ungiven, as a fingerprint is. But what is left unbound? What comes leaking out? What effort did Wylie endure to collect his roadside engines and get his prints of prints? What happened to Drieth’s hands (and prints) as he committed to the trial and error of becoming a human copy machine, making perfect grids with no mistakes, leaving hundreds of failed attempts and hours in his wake?

A triptych, for me, emerges. This that and another. The red and black inked hands of *Opposite Twins*, the graphed hands, drawn square by square in a three-part work by Boetti titled *San Bernardino (mano-aperta-pugno-chiuso)* (1978) in which one hand is open and the other is closed in a fist, echoing a photo of Boetti at the bottom of the piece with his hands in a mirrored placement, and finally a colored photocopy of a hand with a red rubber finger cot covering a book spread open, it’s spine cracked to get the most amount of information shown as efficiently as possible. This final image comes from Benjamin Shaykin’s project *The Hands of Google Books*, which finds images from the countless pages of photocopied books housed within Google’s archives that contain a misplaced accidental hand or finger. The hands belong to workers, employed by Google to scan these tomes, and are not supposed to be there, not for us to see, they are excessive hands. Of these hands, artist Kenneth Goldsmith writes, “Something new is happening here that brings together widespread nostalgia for paperbound books with our concerns about mass digitization...The obsession with digital errors in Google Books arises from the sense that these mistakes are permanent, on the record... Because of the speed and volume with which Google is executing the project, the company can’t possibly identify and correct all of the disturbances in what is supposed to be a seamless interface. There’s little doubt that generations to come will be stuck with both these antique stains and workers’ hands.”¹³

We love finding these hands precisely because we hadn’t expected them to be there. And their presence is an excess that shouldn’t be allowed; antique stains, like stamped mail or a thrown away grid. Or hands made of a grid, or hands clutched together by only one person, or stamped from two. What excess will matter or not in the future?

Rishi Agastya, a Vedic sage, wrote texts called “Naadi” which were thought to predict the past, present, and future lives of all humans from their thumb prints.

There is a work, an excess of a work one could say, which Boetti had made as a test run before he began his woven and embroidered collaboration with craftswomen from Kabul. He had two small samples (for which he provided text drawings) that spelled out dates in block letters and numbers. One read: “Dec. 16, 2040” and the other “July 11, 2023.” The workers sewed these dates (the first, the centenary of his birth, the second, the day he predicted he would die) precisely as he had drawn them but surrounded them with floral decorations. Boetti loved this addition “precisely because he hadn’t expected it.”¹⁴ (He loved the excess.) More that he had not expected, the date of his actual death, April 24, 1994. Boetti had anticipated 29 more years on this earth (2+9 =11).

In the spirit of Boetti’s excessive predictive work, I asked the artists what their sample *Arazzi* might read. Wylie, due more to hope (an aesthetic hope fueled by love and connection with another) than anticipation, hesitated to indicate more than “long” – there would be no given date, but a negotiation of “just more time.” Drieth unhesitatingly jumped at the numerology of 69, requesting his embroidery contain it in one way or the other, pessimistic or optimistic, it did not matter (2038/2069).

But our futures, like fingerprints, are not indelible. There are types of medication which can cause them to disappear, they become harder to capture with age (elasticity decreases, ridges get thicker, prominence narrows). Boetti’s fairly early death left his fingerprints fresh and fine. If he had died at 83, as predicted, this would be a different story. What does it mean to set the date of your own death (and to be wrong as it arrives too soon)? Is this a ping without a pong? A pong that came without your consenting ping? Did you throw the cotton reel out and forget to hold the thread? Does that scare you or free you, to lose that illusory control? You cannot fort and da with your own mortality (you are neither a zombie nor a vampire my friend, I am sad to let you know). But you can press your fingers into something (clay, ink, light) and let that be your this, staying fort and never really da.

Katherine Guinness / March 11, 2084 / September 21, 2054



Endnotes

- ¹ 1,665 copies to be precise. "Exhibition Alighiero Boetti: Minimum/Maximum," *Fondazione Giorgio Cini*. <https://www.cini.it/en/events/mostra-alighiero-boetti-minimummaximum>
- ² Holland Cotter, "The Whole World, Stitched and Patched," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/arts/design/alighiero-boetti-retrospective-at-museum-of-modern-art.html>
- ³ "Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan," *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/alighiero-boetti-game-plan>
- ⁴ Anna Fisher, *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa*, (JRP Editions, 2010).
- ⁵ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 271-272.
- ⁹ "Exhibition Alighiero Boetti: Minimum/Maximum," *Fondazione Giorgio Cini*. <https://www.cini.it/en/events/mostra-alighiero-boetti-minimummaximum>
- ¹⁰ Interview with the artist, Corey Drieth, 8/18/2020.
- ¹¹ Roberta Smith, "Alighiero Boetti: 'La Forza del Centro,'" *The New York Times*, March 7, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/08/arts/design/alighiero-boetti-la-forza-del-centro.html>
- ¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 599.
- ¹³ Kenneth Goldsmith, "The Artful Accidents of Google Books," *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-artful-accidents-of-google-books>
- ¹⁴ Cotter, "The Whole World, Stitched and Patched," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/arts/design/alighiero-boetti-retrospective-at-museum-of-modern-art.html>

Fig. 1

Alighiero e Boetti
Map of the World
Embroidery on fabric
46 1/4" x 7' 3 3/4" x 2" (117.5 x 227.7 x 5.1 cm)
1989
The Museum of Modern Art New York. Scott Burton Fund.
© 2012 Estate of Alighiero Boetti / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.
Photo courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 2

Alighiero e Boetti
PING PONG
Wood, glass, and electrical device
19 11/16" x 19 11/16" x 7 7/8" (50 x 50 x 20 cm)
1966
Goetz Collection, Munich.
© 2012 Estate of Alighiero Boetti/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.
Photo courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 3

Alighiero e Boetti
Gemelli (Twins)
Photomontage
5 7/8 x 3 15/16" (15 x 10 cm)
1968
Private Collection.
© 2012 Estate of Alighiero Boetti / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.
Photo courtesy of the artists.