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## **A tournament of shadows: Alighiero Boetti, the myth of influence, and a contemporary orientalism**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the evolution of the historical and theoretical literature that has developed about the work of the avant-garde Italian artist Alighiero Boetti produced in Afghanistan from 1971 until 1994. Characterised by a set of interrelated cultural and historical fictions, I propose that this collective narrative has evolved to constitute a contemporary orientalist mythology. This is particularly evident in the literature following his death in 1994, and most recently in anticipation of his retrospective exhibitions in the Museo Reina Sofia, Tate Modern, and the Museum of Modern Art in 2011–12. Prior to his death, the literature on Boetti primarily took the form of catalogue essays, journal articles and biographies. These drew heavily on a small number of interviews conducted with the artist, plus accounts and memoirs given by his wives, partners, and curatorial collaborators. Since his death, the literature has further proliferated, and today a greater emphasis is placed on a growing number of secondary authorities. Recent monographs, catalogue essays, and auction house texts draw heavily on the anecdotal accounts of his agents and facilitators, as well as his employees and archivists. In exploring what I describe as the mythologies informing the contemporary reception of his work, I examine the claims of his influence over the distinctive indigenous genre of Afghan narrative carpets which were produced both within Afghanistan as well as by diasporic Afghans in Iran and Pakistan in the years following the 1979 Soviet invasion until the present. The attribution of political intent in the later Boettis, whether attributed to the artist or on the part of his agents, is a recent invention worthy of challenge. Finally I argue that such interpretations of his attitudes and practice might be described as a form of late orientalism, a mode of representation occurring through the appropriation of tradition and the projection of cosmopolitan values and avant-garde practices onto this most conflicted and exoticised cultural context of the contemporary era.

### **Introduction**

In conventional histories of avant-garde art, the work of the *arte povera* artist Alighiero Boetti holds a key place within the European response to the trans-Atlantic rise of process, conceptual, and mail art from the mid-1960s through to his death in 1994. From 1971 he began to commission textile works to be made in Afghanistan. His Afghanistan connection first became evident following the reproduction of one of his first two *Mappa del Mondo* (Map of the World) embroideries on the cover of the May 1972 issue of *DATA* magazine (edited by Tommaso Trini) and in the catalogue of the 1972 Kassel *Documenta 5* (curated by Harald Szeemann).<sup>1</sup> These works were, according to the literature, produced in Afghanistan by a team of women from the ‘Royal School of Embroidery’ in Kabul in 1971–2.<sup>2</sup>

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I am indebted in the first instance to the advice, information, and reflections of Nicola Müllerschön, whose published essay on some aspects of the issues I have raised first encouraged me to embark on this study. In addition I acknowledge the collegial support and advice of Tim Bonyhady, with whom I share a research project into the narrative carpets of the Afghan wars, and that of Pamela Faye McGrath, without whose support and fine-grained criticism the enterprise might have foundered many times.

<sup>1</sup> Trini, 1972; Szeemann, 1972; Müllerschön, 2011a. I am grateful to Nicola Müllerschön for bringing to my attention these first instances of the publication of the first *Mappa*, firstly on the cover of Trini, 1972, for which the caption reads: ‘Copertina/Cover: Alighiero Boetti, “Planisfero ricamato”, eseguito a Kabul, Afghanistan, 1971, Cortesia Galleria Sperone’.

<sup>2</sup> Cerizza, 2008 p. 32. It was Mark Godfrey who coined the term ‘Royal School of Embroidery’ in Godfrey, 2011 p. 233.

Boetti's production of embroidered artworks spans the years 1971 to 1994. The artist's relationship with Afghanistan encompasses three of the four phases of the nation's contemporary history: the relatively peaceful era of the 1970s, the socialist revolution and the decade of Soviet occupation of the 1980s (which lead to the subsequent diaspora of millions to Iran and Pakistan), followed in the early 1990s by horrific civil war and the rise of the Taliban. Subsequently, Boetti's posthumous art history has continued to evolve in the context of the subsequent decade of foreign intervention that has followed the events of September 11 2001.

Most monographs on the artist state that that Boetti travelled to Kabul at least twice a year from 1971 until 1979. During these years, through agents, he established networks of women textile workers who translated his drawings and prints (of maps, text-poems and other more complex imagery), which had been transcribed or printed on a linen substrate by his workers in Rome, into embroidered pictures. After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in late 1979, Boetti ceased his travels to Afghanistan and instead, between 1985 and 1992, he occasionally travelled to Peshawar in Pakistan. In Peshawar Boetti typically had his agents arrange for the subsequent works to be outsourced to available women with appropriate skills from among the millions of Afghan refugees who had fled to the Northwest Frontier region of Pakistan. In the 1990s, in Peshawar, he also commissioned a series of *kilims* (flat-weave textiles) and finally, in 1994, three large knotted carpets.

### **Fictions of Influence**

As his biographers document, in the 1970s Boetti's work began to be widely accepted in group and solo exhibitions throughout Europe and North America. This became the stimulus for what I shall refer to as the "Boetti literature" – the growing body of catalogue essays, reviews, interviews and monographs that accompanied his ascendancy in the art world. While ordinarily many of the sources examined here would not be considered sufficiently significant to constitute an art historical "literature", from a perspective of disciplinary integrity, I have taken the position that these texts merit critical engagement, whether or not they are poorly expressed, exaggerated, ambiguous, factually erroneous, or based on unsubstantiated cross-cultural assumptions. *En masse*, as an evolving set of art world tropes, these dispersed but related elements of the Boetti literature now constitute his art historical corpus.

The writer Luca Cerizza's recent monograph *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa* was the first of a number of recent comprehensive summaries of this particular chapter of European art history. Cerizza retells the story of how Boetti first organised the outsourcing of the production of his first embroidered artworks on his second visit to Kabul in the company of his then wife and collaborator, and subsequent curator and historian, Annemarie Sauzeau, in September 1971. When interviewed by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1992, Boetti admitted that his first two *Mappe* elicited somewhat contradictory responses from audiences in Europe, and that it was his dealer Gian Enzo Sperone who encouraged him to produce

more.<sup>3</sup> Over the next twenty years, the designs for his 150-plus world maps and his other imagery (titled *Arazzi* and *Tutto*) were contracted out to as many as 500 women embroiderers, first in Kabul, and later in the Afghan refugee camps of Peshawar and surrounding districts.

Together with numerous other curators, essayists and commentators, Cerizza also promotes the now widespread assumption that the virtual industry established by Boetti was the stimulus for other forms of innovation within the visual culture of Afghanistan. In this manner, the literature has created a mythology around Boetti's influence over other forms of Afghan cultural practices – particularly over the distinctive forms carpet-making that emerge in the 1980s in response to the Soviet occupation.<sup>4</sup> In addition to carpets that depict narratives of the experience of war, from the late 1980s onwards, one also finds a number of carpets depicting the map of the world (or parts of the world) — some of which are framed by militaria, and some of which include military paraphernalia within the cartographic space.

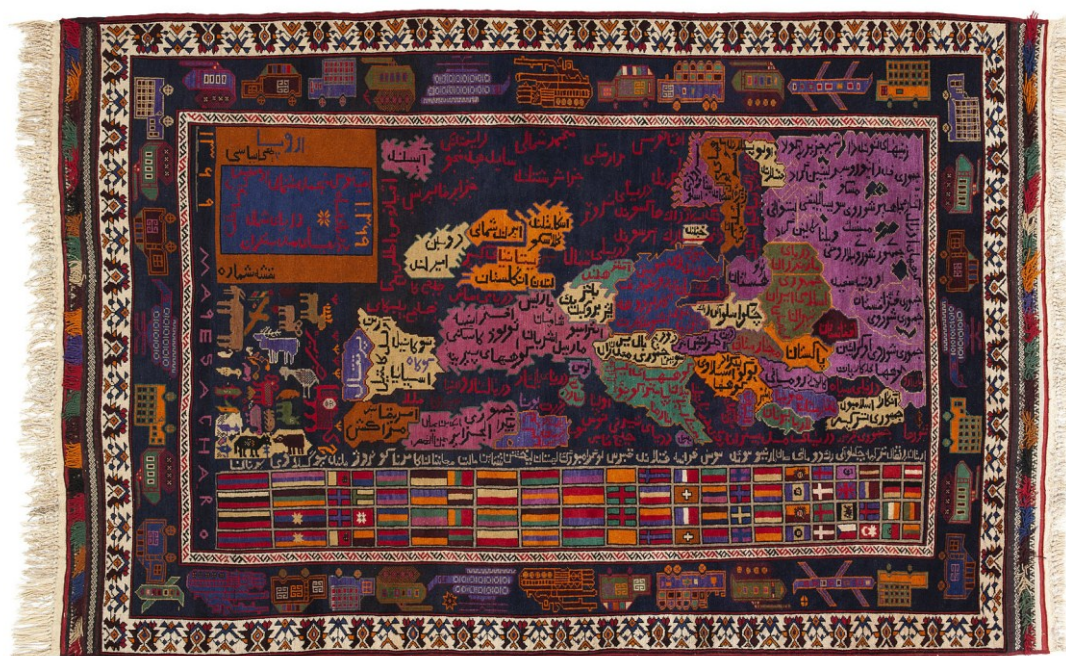


Fig. 1. Artist unknown, Map of Europe framed by militaria, ca. 1992. Wool on wool, 2830 x 1830 cm, Canberra, private collection. (Photo credit: Rob Little.)

As a recent published discussion between Randi Malkin Steinberger and Alessandro Bonomo suggests, such examples of the carpet-makers' art are now widely assumed to have derived from the coincidental production of Boetti embroideries in Kabul in the 1980s and later, in Peshawar:

Randi Malkin Steinberger: Let's talk about how things evolved. The fact is, these people were also influenced by Alighiero's work. Their tradition inspired him – we see this in his work – and in turn they drew from

<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud, 1992, pp. 52-3.

<sup>4</sup> Lendon, 2008, pp. 678-83. See also Bonyhady and Lendon, 2003.

Alighiero's work, with the Afghans beginning to make the "war rugs" during the time of the Russians ...

Alessandro Bonomo: Yes, they began right after the Russians arrived in '79 and then around '87 or '88 we start to see the map of Afghanistan. This was probably Alighiero's influence on these rug makers.

Randi Malkin Steinberger: You can see so many similarities – the addition of flags and writings around the edges. How did Alighiero feel about this? I heard he was happy about it.

Alessandro Bonomo: ... someone would say to him, 'Come on, they are copying you!' and he would reply, 'It's better if they copy me. I am glad, I don't care at all.' He had introduced the idea, that's what mattered.<sup>5</sup>

A point of clarification is necessary from the outset. There are two forms of textile practice that are often conflated in the Boetti literature.<sup>6</sup> Embroidery, as practiced by the Afghan women first employed by Boetti, is a form of needlework (variously called Bukhara, or satin stitch) on a textile base. In the case of the later Boetti works, these were made with Scottish thread usually on an inscribed (or screen-printed) linen or muslin substrate sent to Peshawar from Rome.<sup>7</sup> Carpet-making, as practiced by women, children and sometimes men across most of the different ethnic regions of Afghanistan (and in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan), is a form of woollen knotted pile rug constructed on the warp and weft on a loom. The indigenous production of Afghan "war rugs" began in the early 1980s, and continues until the present.

However the commissioning process initiated by Boetti in the 1970s created an entirely new form of art object, which was enabled by virtue of the traditional skills of Afghan women embroiderers, but which was iconographically and structurally quite different from anything they had made previously. Arguably, even the stitch-structure of the embroideries (with the exception of the first few *suzani*) has an Italian origin. In her 2003 biography of Boetti, Sauzeau points to the lost work *Moon* (1968), which is a drawing in chalk on blackboard, as the precursor for the graphic structure of both the *Mappe* and of the Biro drawings, the commissioning of which began after the artist's return to Rome in 1971.<sup>8</sup> The visual coherence of the works in both media was first established when the second *Mappa* and the first two Biro works, which share this same graphic detail, were exhibited together at the Gian Enzo Sperone & Konrad Fischer gallery in Rome in 1973.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gute, 2011, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> In this essay I consider the 'Boetti literature' to be constituted by the whole range of discourse from the historically-grounded monographs to the catalogues, press releases and the web data produced by his dealers and agents, speaking as the voices of his posthumous identity.

<sup>7</sup> Gute, 2011, p. 95. Steinberger references the use of a screenprinted substrate in the interview by Alma Ruiz published in Hamilton, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Sauzeau, 2003a, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Boetti exhibited the following works produced in 1972-3 at the Gian Enzo Sperone & Konrad Fischer (Rome) exhibition 'Alighiero Boetti. Mettere al mondo il mondo' in 1973: *Mappa* #360, 'Serie di merli disposti ad intervalli regolari lungo gli spalti di una muraglia' (a telegram work), plus 'two



The conventional account also suggests that it was Boetti's avant-gardist and innovative association with an exotic and culturally remote culture that had created a kind of "new tradition" in Afghanistan, plus a kind of cultural exchange that was predictive of twenty-first-century globalism. The proposition that an ideologically neutral, "relational" equivalence could have been created by Boetti's activities, firstly in Afghanistan, and later in the refugee camps outside Peshawar, is a further dimension of the aspirations of such a narrative. For example, in a catalogue entry in June 2010, the auction house Christie's promoted his significance in characteristically effusive terms:

In the commissioning of the production of his *Mappe* from local women weavers, for example, Boetti effectively opened a new commercial East-West dialogue not based on exploitative trade but on a spirit of cross-cultural collaboration that ultimately had an important influence for both Afghanistan and Europe. Among the first artists not only to have his work manufactured by assistants but also in the non-mechanised archaic and folk art handicraft tradition of a "Third World" country, the *Mappe* represent a bridging of the modern and ancient worlds as much as they do a crossing of the traditional East-West divide. At the same time, in Afghanistan, Boetti's commissioning of the *Mappe* eventually had the effect of reinvigorating the ancient weaving tradition in Afghanistan that had been dying out.<sup>10</sup>

In his 2008 monograph, Cerizza had taken as a given Boetti's authoritative cosmopolitan vantage point, agency and economic advantage as the basis for the primacy of his artworks in relation to coexisting indigenous practices.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, Cerizza suggested that the iconography was 'incomprehensible' to the (illiterate) embroiderers due to the makers' lack of the necessary cultural knowledge or access to the visual codes by which the maps might be understood. And yet, contradictorily, he also suggests that the process Boetti initiated was ultimately *educational*: 'Boetti's tapestries' he claims, became for these women 'a vehicle for knowledge of world geography'.<sup>12</sup>

### **How tradition is appropriated: the myth of 'Boetti Style' carpets**

A central claim made by Boetti and his followers is that he had in fact revived an extinct tradition – that of Bukhara (or Hazara, or Tajik, or Pashtun, depending on the circumstances) needlecraft – and further, that he had inspired the practitioners of these traditions to create a new culture of innovative forms in other textile media. In Boetti's own contradictory account of his encounter with

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large works in blue ballpoint': *'Il progressivo svanire della consuetudine'* and the diptych *'Mettere al mondo il mondo'*.

<sup>10</sup> Christie's, 2010, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Cerizza, 2008, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Christies, 2010. 'In cultural terms too, the *Mappe*, besides providing economic sustenance to many Afghan families, also came to prove instructional; introducing all who saw them, to the first world maps, and indeed, sometimes, the very first maps that many of them had ever seen ... political information about the wider world also entered into the traditionally closed and highly insular spaces of Afghan society and refugees in a kind of clandestine way.'

the medium of embroidery, he claimed that it had not been practiced for fifty years. When interviewed by Anna Matriolo in 1992, Boetti revealed his willingness to attribute the reinvention of tradition to himself: 'The embroidery is done by Afghan women who look back on a long tradition in this area. Embroidery came to a stop in their country in the 1920s, but started anew with my contracts.'<sup>13</sup> On the basis of this brief comment, one finds throughout the evolution of the Boetti literature repeated references to the invention of his embroideries as a 'traditional' medium from an 'age-old' or 'archaic' culture, from 'a tradition spanning thousands of years', or more modestly, from a 'thousand year old' culture.<sup>14</sup>

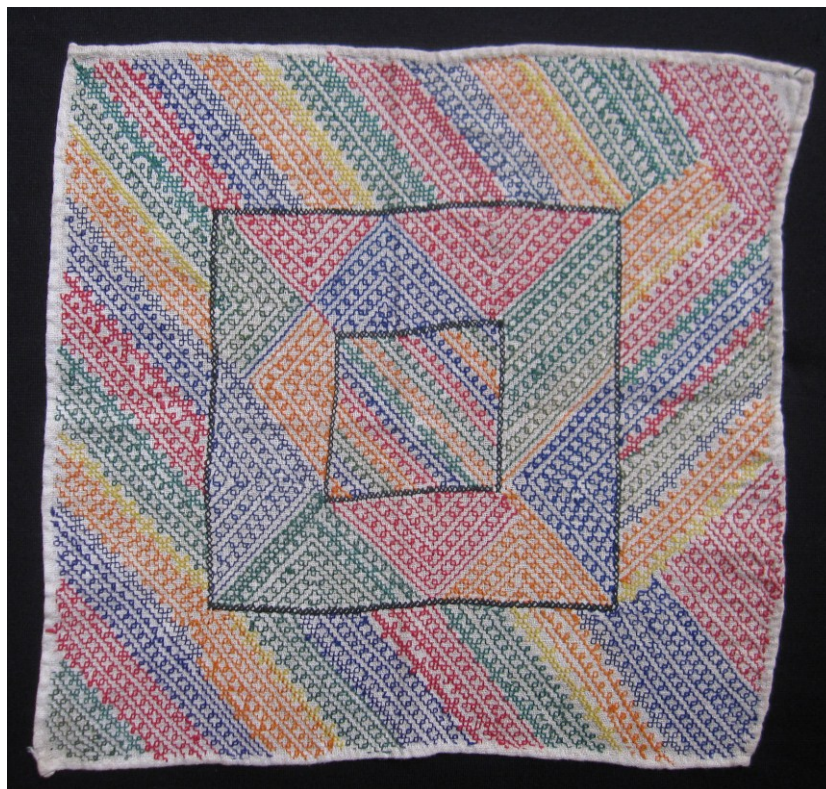


Fig. 2. Artist unknown, Hazara people, prayer stone cover (*mohr posh*), 1965-75. Embroidery (silk or mercerised cotton on cotton), 28 x 28 cm. Canada, Max Allen collection. (Photo credit: Max Allen.)

Such bold claims are, however, contradicted by the evidence of the existing material qualities and structure of the first embroidered panels that Boetti had commissioned during his initial visit to Afghanistan in the autumn of 1971. For these works, the artist commissioned the insertion of text and numerals (the dates of his predicted death and the centennial of his birth) into an existing medium and style of needlework called *suzani* that is historically attributed to Tajik women from Bukhara in Uzbekistan. These few initial links to traditional

<sup>13</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 59. Sauzeau attributes this interview to Daniela de Dominicis, in *Alighiero Boetti. L'opera ultima* (Pinto, 1996). See also the version of the story in Christie's, 2011: 'Indeed, in Afghanistan, Boetti's commissioning of the *Mappe* eventually had the effect of re-invigorating the ancient handicraft tradition of embroidery, originating from Bukhara but which was almost dying out in Kabul.'

<sup>14</sup> Ali, 2009, n.p.

practice sit in marked contrast to the non-traditional form and structure of the embroidered maps that Boetti commissioned later in the same year.

It is now also the convention in the Boetti literature to propose that there is an instrumental connection between Boetti's embroidered works and the Afghan war and map carpets, which assigns Boetti a key role in the origins of innovative Afghan carpets more generally. Extrapolating from the transcript of the 1992 interview with Boetti by Bourriaud, Cerizza promotes the claim that the new carpet genre was actually a consequence of Boetti's influence. Boetti himself contributed but one single 'anecdote' in reference to war carpets, as here translated by Simon Pleasance in 2003:

in Peshawar, there are a million Afghan refugees. Among them, some craftspeople are making carpets in a new style, with helicopters, tanks, western words, and the like. An Afghan living in Milan, who markets this kind of carpet, used the term "Boetti style" when he talked about them, and said this style had become obligatory in Afghanistan! How about that! A guy from Turin like me who goes off to the uttermost ends of Asia and manages to have an influence on a tradition spanning thousands of years ... That would almost be a good reason to stop doing what I'm doing!<sup>15</sup>

This anecdote has subsequently suffered much repetition and elaboration. Boetti's first wife and biographer Sauzeau also creates an abbreviated version of the original text – presumably in order to reinforce such assumptions of Boetti's influence. In 2003 she paraphrased a part of Boetti's original comment: 'People talk about a "Boetti style" in relation to [the atlas carpets], which would become widespread in Afghanistan! How about that! A guy from Turin like me who goes off to Central Asia and ends up having an influence on an age-old tradition'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, together with a conversation recorded in 2007 with Boetti's Afghan agent Salman Ali, who has lived in Rome since 1973, it was the anecdote above that provided Cerizza with the basis of his imaginary account of the presumed effect that Boetti's art-producing industry had on the invention of the war carpet, *and* the geographical carpets. Cerizza claims: 'the embroiderers of one family who worked on Boetti's maps later began producing – for the first time in Afghan history – carpets depicting Afghan and world geography, often accompanied by very detailed reproductions of weapons.'<sup>17</sup>

What follows in the period following his death is a complex of further historically shaky assumptions and claims, formed to suit the demands of the marketplace, derived from a series of subsequent interpretations of translations derived from Boetti's original comment.<sup>18</sup> The proposition that the cosmopolitan origins of Boetti's innovative application of the medium of needlecraft actually triggered equivalent developments in another traditional textile medium (that is, in carpet-making) has further implications for the reception of the *Mappe*.

<sup>15</sup> Bourriaud, 1992, p. 54, reprinted in Sauzeau, 2003b (translated by Simon Pleasance).

<sup>16</sup> Sauzeau, 2003a, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Cerizza, 2008, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Christie's, 2011, n.p. The anonymous author at Christie's takes the claim further still: 'even inspired the creation of a new tradition of weaving: propagandistic geo-political carpets and *kilims* protesting the occupation.'

Oblivious to the fact that atlas carpets have a deep prehistory within Persian/Afghan and Turkish carpet traditions, Cerizza extended this account to assert that the 'idea' for such carpets was, in fact, first derived from Boetti's *Mappa*, which subsequently resulted in the creation of the war rugs. Cerizza writes:

In fact Boetti's idea was taken up by Afghans as a tool for anti-Soviet propaganda. They produced carpets that functioned as reportage. Their imagery spoke of military operations carried out on Afghan soil and related information about the social and political realities of Afghanistan in those years. Boetti's maps were therefore inserted into an existing society with its own productive system and folk tradition, contributing to design and content and, in time, influencing local craftsmanship.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly Cerizza had not absorbed the revealing discussion between Sauzeau and the French artist (and collector of war carpets) Michel Aubry in 2003, when she put Boetti's anecdote into further perspective: 'This [rumour] amused him, but he never refuted it, because it was quite flattering.'<sup>20</sup>

### **Travellers' whispers: the *Mappa* embroideries and the 'Boetti-style' carpets**

As much as these passages in contemporary art history mask the complexity of the actual evolution of the new Afghan art form of the war rug, it is the assumption of the influence of Boetti on the evolution of both the war rugs and the atlas carpets I wish to counter here. In the remainder of this essay I demonstrate that the suggestion of Boetti's influence on indigenous carpet-making has no supporting evidence, outside of the rumours and assumptions made between Boetti and his close circle of friends, family, employees, dealers and the custodians of his estate. To the contrary, the counter-evidence derives from many sources. It is well known that planispheric atlas carpets existed in the region prior to 1971, and there are precursors authoritatively dated to the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Sauzeau herself knew about the existence of such precursors. In her published conversation with Aubry, she asks: 'But it is true, the way certain Italian travellers whisper, that there was already an old tradition of the geographical carpet in Afghanistan, before all those appearing on the market in the late 1980s?''<sup>22</sup>

Objectively, there is but a single point of iconographic coincidence between a Boetti *Mappa* and an atlas carpet. Just as Boetti's first coloured-in cartoon of flags drawn onto a school wall atlas (*Planisfero politico*, 1969) was the conceptual design for his first *Mappa*, so the myriad of other printed precedents, in school rooms in Afghanistan and in libraries and on walls the world over, have in turn served as the model for images such atlas carpets.<sup>23</sup> However, none of the atlas carpets from the late 1980s and early 1990s subsequently sold as

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<sup>19</sup> Cerizza, 2008 pp. 76-7.

<sup>20</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Aschenbrenner, 2005, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> Ammann, 2010, p. 16. Ammann claims the original was 'found in a junk shop'. Marcia Vetrocq refers to the *Planisfero politico* as an 'assisted readymade', see Vetrocq, 2001, pp. 86-93, p. 113.



‘Boetti Style’, embody *any* of Boetti’s signature motifs or graphic devices. To the contrary, these carpets are full of their original didactic atlas origins, with text and graphics transferred from the graphic original, usually written in Farsi, with references back to a deep history of their precursors. Atlas carpets characteristically reproduce a block of flags below, and include headline panels of text as derived from the original print version. Boetti’s original cartoon is based on such an example, minus the block of flags, but with a text-block, which, notably, was never reproduced in the embroidered versions.

Similarly, the map of Afghanistan found in war carpets was accessible from any number of precursor sources, as were other images for figurative carpets, as readily as the prototypes derived directly from commonly available road maps and similar graphic origins. Such is the faithfulness by which carpet makers can reproduce the detail of their graphic sources, these carpets often contain relatively meaningless imagery such as agricultural zones, time zones and scale measures, and later, the blocks of abstracted flags.



Fig. 3. Artist unknown, Atlas carpet, ca. 1980s. Wool on wool, 1470 x 1010 cm, Canberra, private collection. (Photo credit: Rob Little.)

Thus the atlas carpets that again began to be produced in the 1980s were made complete with the texts, headlines and even the international datelines carefully copied and transcribed into knotted carpet form. Despite such evidence of carpet-makers’ enthusiasm for faithful copying of their graphic sources, *never* does one find a carpet that is based on Boetti’s characteristic flag-within-the-geographic-boundary motif (or any of his other characteristic graphic elements from the text-based *Arrazzo* or *Tutto* embroideries). It is only later in the post-Soviet era that the iconography of world atlas carpets and the war carpets are merged – most commonly by the use of a frame of military equipment, and sometimes through the inclusions of militaria and other emblems within the image of the map itself.





Fig. 4. Artist unknown, Najibullah as puppet, ca. 1990. Wool on wool, 970 x 1480 cm, Canberra, private collection. (Photo credit: Rob Little.)

### The sources of political imagery

From the mid-1980s, other overtly political uses of the emblem of the map of Afghanistan with armaments are known, which derive from the more explicit graphic political propaganda generated from within Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> There are also

<sup>24</sup> The earliest documented war carpet that incorporates the emblem of the map of Afghanistan is dated 1986 (Ella Naef collection, Los Angeles).



other sources of visual propaganda which appear to feed more directly into the 1980s map carpets and anti-Soviet carpets, and which bear no resemblance at all to anything Boetti ever produced.

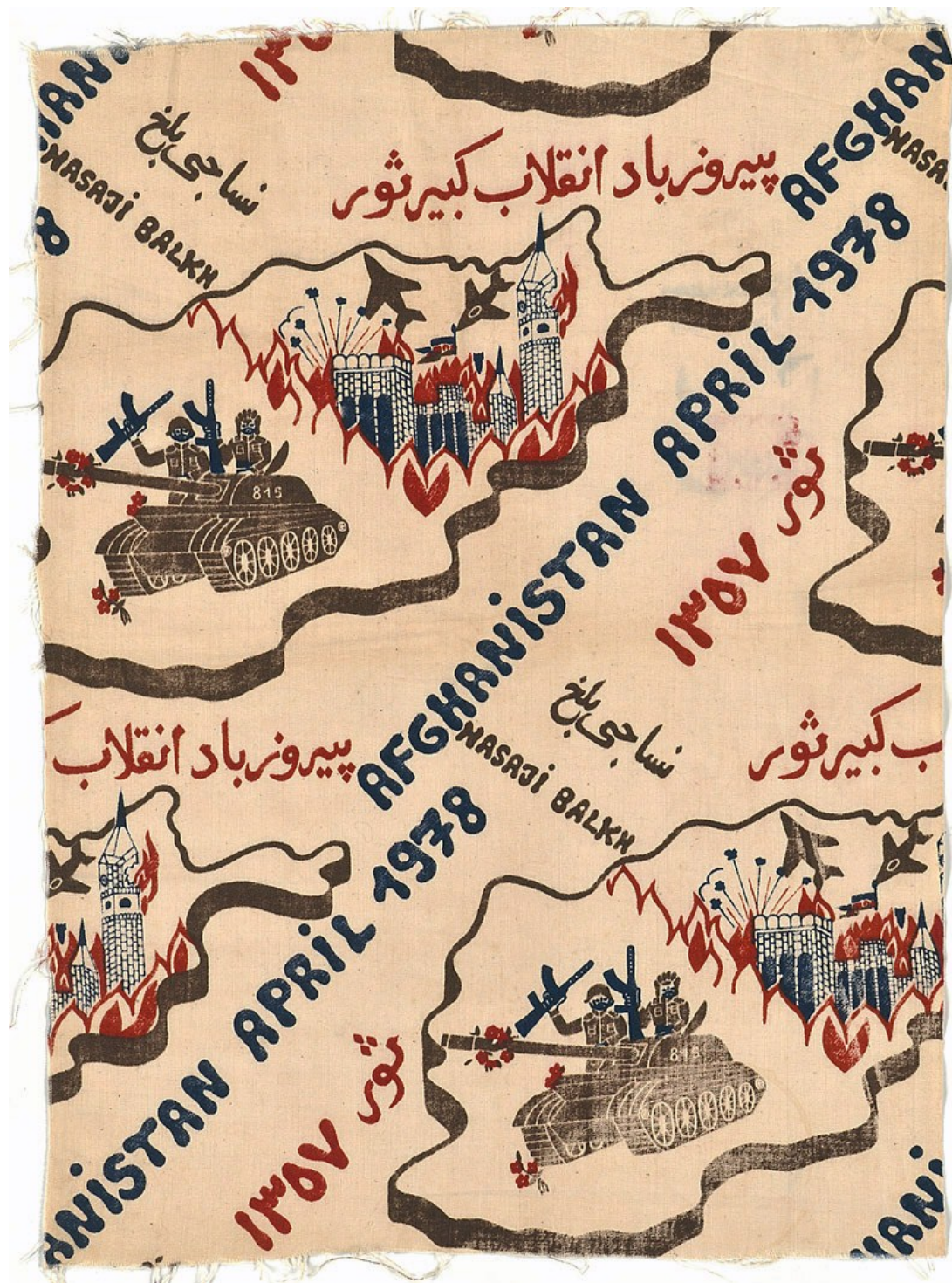


Fig. 5. Artist unknown, 1978. Screenprinted fabric, 39.5 x 54 cm. Australian National University archive, gift of Tatiana Divens. (Photo credit: Rob Little.)

Cartography has long held a place both within the carpet tradition and Afghan visual culture more generally. Sauzeau herself gives evidence of the vernacular use of the map as an emblem of national identity from the pre-Soviet era,

writing: 'In Afghanistan, the map of homeland was already present in 1970, in peace time ... It recurred as a decorative motif, on trucks and carts, on stamps and shop signs.'<sup>25</sup> Despite such published references, innumerable writers, editors and curators have speculated that the production of the more than 150 embroidered *Mappe* made in Kabul and Peshawar from 1972 to 1994 was the stimulus for the adoption of the emblem of the map of Afghanistan, and later the world atlas, in war carpets from the late 1980s. And yet the myth of influence, or what we might now call the appropriation of tradition, seems to be gaining strength as an accepted historical truth. In a recent exhibition, held in Rome in 2011 entitled *Tappeti di Guerra intrecci di pace* (War carpets with peaceful intent), Boetti's original Afghan assistant Ali reinforces this idea, suggesting: 'In a thousand-year old tradition, handicraft and contemporary art have met themselves thanks to Alighiero Boetti who has forever transformed the meaning of carpets.'<sup>26</sup>

Also exhibited in this exhibition was a text written by the Italian *Vogue* contributor Mariuccia Casadio, which is a kind of homage to the friendship of Boetti and Ali. By this account they met in Kabul in the early 1970s, and Boetti took him to Rome and integrated him into his family. In this text Boetti is called the 'friend and master', and Ali his 'practical alter ego', his 'faithful shadow' and his 'squire'.<sup>27</sup> According to the author, they both paid tribute to Afghanistan: through his work Boetti transformed Afghan contemporary culture, and Ali now makes a living importing rugs from Afghanistan like the ones exhibited in the exhibition.<sup>28</sup> The carpets in this exhibition are further promoted by an online discourse, which also suggests that without Boetti, the war carpet would not exist. Such interpretations have become embedded in the market for war carpets. The gallery's promotional text continues in the same manner: '*Le Case d'Arte* currently presents a series of Afghan rugs which are linked by a thread that, we have to say, leads us also to Boetti'.<sup>29</sup> And in the same context, the gallerist Pasquale Leccese suggests on camera that the war rugs as a genre had been regarded as valueless until the 'contemporary art scene' had recognised them as analogues of Boetti maps.<sup>30</sup> In short, the claim is that Boetti had made these carpets collectable, just as by contrast the carpets rendered the embroideries extravagantly avant-garde.<sup>31</sup>

### **In curatorial strategies, proximity proves nothing**

The curatorial and editorial strategy of exhibiting the two different genres side-by-side proposes that the innovative carpets lend their authenticity to the Boetti embroideries in the exhibition and publishing scenarios in which they appear.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sauzeau, 2003a, pp.150-3.

<sup>26</sup> Ali, 2005, n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Casadio, 2005, n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Casadio, 2005, n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Ali, 2005, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Ali, 2005, n.p.

<sup>31</sup> Ali, 2005, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> '[P]erhaps the first commercial East-West dialogue of the twentieth century, not to be based on exploitative trade but on a spirit of cross-cultural collaboration. Indeed, in Afghanistan, Boetti's commissioning of the *Mappe* eventually had the effect of re-invigorating the ancient handicraft



In such circumstances, it is as if the Boetti embroideries have come naturally, legitimately and authentically from the same (exotic) cultural source as the Afghan war rug and further that, as a consequence, the Boetti-style embroideries have also caused the modernization of the carpet-making industry.

Such assumptions have been reinforced by the phenomenon of contemporary curatorial practice (as well as related editorial decisions in publications) whereby Boetti maps and war carpets have been exhibited together – as seen recently in the exhibition *Penelope's Labour: Weaving Words and Images* during the 2011 Venice Biennale – again without any justificatory evidence or commentary.<sup>33</sup> Simon Bordone has written about this recent conjunction in the following terms in *Domus*:

An Afghan war rug and one of Alighiero Boetti's famous maps might be deemed the most successful combination, in which you can sense the link [between the two]. Boetti's maps were a conceptual rereading of the world's political organisation, entrusted to the hands of Afghan embroiderers. The war rugs, first woven after the 1979 Russian invasion to narrate its events, marked a break away from classical design patterns. Both produced in the same country with traditional craft methods, they are examples of creative innovation.<sup>34</sup>

In such claims, the relationship suggested by the conjunction of two similar artefacts made in the same general cultural context, when presented in the same semantic space of an exhibition (or a catalogue, or a journal), implies that the mere comparison is sufficient to prove a mutually dependent relationship. Thus when these two different textile media (embroidery and carpet) are exhibited together, or illustrated one with the other, or when more explicit claims are made about their supposed connectedness, the inference is that it is the authenticity of Boetti's new style that is thereby being demonstrated. In such contexts, the invocation of 'tradition' serves to amplify the hyper-modernity of Boetti's avant-gardist practice – as if by stretching the temporal frame between the contemporary moment and the deep past one simultaneously effects a projection of the immediate past into the future.

Exhibitions of war carpets had already been held in Italy in contemporary art galleries from as early as 1988, at first through the initiative of the art historian and collector Luca Brancati. However, it was not until the end of the 1980s that the war carpet entered the literature of contemporary art, when Eva Kuryluk wrote 'The Afghan War Rugs' for *Arts Magazine* in February 1989.<sup>35</sup> However, the precursor for suggestively meaningful associations between *Mappe* and war carpets may be traced back to what seems to be a relatively casual gesture by Boetti himself. In the June 1990 issue of the journal *Parkett*, which was produced 'in collaboration' with Boetti, the war carpets are introduced to the mainstream of the art world in association with the survey of Boetti's work.

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tradition of embroidery, originating from Bukhara but which was almost dying out in Kabul.' Christie's, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> The exhibition was held at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

<sup>34</sup> Bordone, 2011, n.p.

<sup>35</sup> Kuryluk, 1989, pp. 72–4.

While most of this issue of *Parkett* is directly concerned with Boetti's own artistic output, three war carpets are also illustrated. The first is a fragment in the Boetti frontispiece to this issue, which is composed of a montage of Afghanistan-related snapshots, with a by-then conventional war rug depicting the map of Afghanistan positioned centrally. Later in the issue, two other war carpets are reproduced and discussed in a section entitled 'War – Sign – War'. They were photographed (the introduction describes) in 'a German market' by Rudolf Trefzer, and were reproduced accompanied by 'first impression' text commentaries written by Friedrich Kittler, Jorg Drechsel, Rosemarie Trockel, Eva Linhart, Gilbert Lauscault and Thomas Baryle. While none of these writers explicitly cross-reference their responses to the war carpets to the work of Boetti, the die is hereby cast for an *implicit* association between the two different types of artefact.

A decade later, in the Milan exhibition held in November 2001 titled *Afghanistan: Tappeti di Guerra, Tappeti del Mondo*, the gallerist Sergio Poggianella took these implications a step further by actually exhibiting two Boetti *Mappe* in conjunction with atlas carpets, paired in the manner of a diptych. Four works by Boetti are included in the catalogue: two *Mappe* dated 1984 and 1988, one *Arrazzo* from 1989, and one *Tutto* from 1987. In one of the catalogue essays, titled 'The War and the World', the curator Enrico Mascelloni tells the story of his search for the mythical 'Ligiero' world map carpets in Kabul in 1997.<sup>36</sup> Mascelloni tells the story of meeting one Gulhan Sakhi, a dealer in the Shinwari Bazaar in Peshawar, who he relates as having no memories of Boetti's 'tapestries ... and less so of my geographical ones.' This dealer advised him that 'the most antique rugs with the world on them ... had started circulating in Kabul in the 60s and no-one remembers who by and why they had been created.' Mascelloni mournfully concluded: 'It was in abandon and boredom that we established that none of those rugs were presumably of [by, or for] Boetti'.<sup>37</sup> In another of this catalogue's essays titled 'Afghanistan: War Carpets and Boetti' Poggianella summarised otherwise familiar references to the significance of Boetti's work (again quoting the interview from 1992 with Bourriaud) without, however, claiming any necessary or specific relationship between Boetti's work and the geographical or war carpets.<sup>38</sup> Despite the conclusions reached by Mascelloni, Poggianella proposes a 'spontaneous' 'coupling' of Boetti's embroideries and the Afghan carpets. While in his catalogue essay, however, Poggianella goes no further than separately offering a description of the origins of each genre, the 'spontaneous coupling' nevertheless remains the guiding metaphor of the event, without further argument or substantiation.

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<sup>36</sup> Mascelloni, 2001, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Mascelloni, 2001, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Mascelloni, 2001, p. 12. This catalogue illustrates four works by Boetti, five works by Sarenco (including an exhibition in 1997 with conjunctions between war carpet and his own work) then twenty-eight war carpets, plus forty-five maps of Afghanistan, a field war carpet, then five 'geographical' maps of Afghanistan, plus eight rest-of-world maps.

## Evidence, interpretation, mythology

In the 1992 Bourriaud interview, when Boetti speaks about the production of war carpets, he relates that it was an Afghan dealer in Milan who had referred to them as ‘Boetti style’. Yet Boetti himself made no explicit claims about exercising such an influence ‘on a tradition spanning thousands of years’, and even concludes speculatively that if he had such an effect ‘that would almost be a good reason to stop doing what I’m doing!’<sup>39</sup> Despite this admission, through the repetition of such anecdotes one can observe how the Boetti mythology has accumulated through familiars, dealers, critics and historians all basing their interpretations on these limited sources or the subsequent assumptions made without further corroborative evidence. The unidentified Afghan dealer in Milan, the commentary from the artist’s ‘loyal’ assistant/dealer Ali, plus approximately a thousand words from interviews translated in French, English and German has been sufficient to generate the whole historical account of the scope and cross-cultural significance implied in the Boetti literature.

The actual circumstances of Boetti’s own discovery of geographic carpets and war rugs in Peshawar is also at best historically ambiguous. In 2003, Sauzeau related Boetti’s experience of the war rugs and geographical carpets in the following terms:

On the territorial forms, the names are written at times in Persian, at times in the Latin alphabet, and these maps are surrounded by “flags of the world” arrayed frieze-like, as are the grenades and other explosives in the “war carpets” which Boetti readily purchased between Quetta and Peshawar as gifts for his friends.<sup>40</sup>

When did this occur? Boetti started to travel to Peshawar in mid-1985, then in late 1988, and finally in 1992. Strangely, however, in his 1992 interview with Bourriaud he makes no mention of seeing such carpets or buying them himself, or of their conjunction in the pages of his issue of *Parkett*. He refers instead to the rumour about the Afghan dealer in Milan, from which we may conclude that the war carpets were not as significant to Boetti as has been subsequently suggested by his inner circle of familiars, agents and friends.

If in fact Boetti had first encountered war carpets in 1985, or 1988, why then did he not immediately share them with his close colleagues, or give them to his friends, as Sauzeau suggests? By contrast, Jean-Christophe Ammann, who was the Director of MoMA Frankfurt, who had curated Boetti’s first solo exhibition in 1974, and who was also the author of numerous Boetti texts, vividly recalls his first sighting of the war carpet in 1989. Indeed in the lead essay in the 1990 issue of *Parkett*, Ammann inserts the following ‘Aside’: ‘Last Summer I visited Gunther Forg. I saw rugs from Afghanistan and could not believe my eyes. The traditional vocabulary of forms had been replaced by tanks, airplanes, helicopters, so skilfully executed in traditional patterns they were not

<sup>39</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 76, translation by Simon Pleasance.

<sup>40</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 25.

immediately recognizable.<sup>41</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that if this was the moment when Boetti's close colleague and advocate saw his first war carpets, then it is unlikely Boetti himself had seen them (or bought them) before 1988. Otherwise, surely Boetti would have already brought them to Ammann's attention himself before 1989. Boetti's friend the American photographer Steinberger recalls seeing her first war carpet when it arrived at Boetti's studio in a package of other carpets in 1990.<sup>42</sup> Given that she had spent the previous years documenting Boetti's studio, it seems reasonable to expect that she would have been aware of any war carpets had they been a part of Boetti's environment at that time. Thus the conventional assumption by Cerizza and others of the Boetti influence on the origins of the genre in the previous decade is rendered another degree more implausible.

In 1990, Steinberger travelled to Peshawar on consignment to photograph the circumstances of Boetti's embroidery production. In her photographs of the offices of Boetti's agents, two war carpets are visible hanging on the walls. In another photograph, Boetti's Sufi 'master' Berang Ramazan is depicted against the backdrop of a war carpet of the same style as that featured in the 1990 *Parkett* montage frontispiece, and similar to that which Steinberger had seen in Rome earlier the same year.<sup>43</sup> This type of war rug (usually identified as 'Turkmen style') employs the emblem of the map of Afghanistan as a vignette into which a figurative narrative showing the *mujihadeen* in battle with the Soviet forces is inserted. The arguments put forward by Ali and others that Boetti's *Mappe* and the other embroideries had been the trigger for the production of the war carpets – which had begun almost a decade earlier, and the existence of which was known in Europe since the early 1980s – is thus rendered less and less plausible as a valid sequence of events for writers like Cerizza and others to base their claims.<sup>44</sup>

All the available evidence from war carpet collections formed in the 1980s demonstrates that the initial production of war carpets can be traced to the first years of occupation by the Soviets, and that this occurred across a wide range of the regions of Afghanistan relatively independent of each other.<sup>45</sup> This is demonstrated by the wide range of regional styles, together with a range of innovative new variations to traditional forms, into which the iconography of war was inserted beginning in the early 1980s.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Afghan carpet scholars have reported on the existence of innovative pictorial carpets from (at

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<sup>41</sup> Ammann, 1990, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Naef, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Steinberger, 2009, n.p. Steinberger also acted as a courier: 'When I got back to Rome with the photographs and suitcases filled with completed *Mappe del Mondo* (world maps) *arazzi* (grid embroideries) and *I Tutto*, Alighiero was thrilled to finally see photographs of the women working on his embroideries, with boxes of thread of all the colours imaginable and children everywhere.'

<sup>44</sup> The first war carpet to be reproduced in any context is on the invitation of the Swiss dealer Reto Christoffel, in November 1981, which had been collected in Kabul earlier the same year.

<sup>45</sup> Lendon, 2008, pp. 678–83. See also Allen, 2008.

<sup>46</sup> As argued above, whereas many of the developments in the war rug genre may be traced to specific visual antecedents, *none* of the new graphic forms and styles of the war carpet have reproduced any stylistic characteristic that may be traced to the Boetti *Mappe*. And in fact the earliest examples of war rugs as illustrated above have all the material and structural characteristics of the Baluch tradition from the western provinces of Afghanistan, far distant from the Hazara workforce Boetti had accessed in Kabul, Quetta and Peshawar. Mattiolo, 1996.



least) as early as 1972.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, Cerizza's suggestion that it was Boetti's influence – or rather Boetti's agent's version of that influence – that is the authoritative account of the multiple origins and subsequent developments of the war carpet genre should, more appropriately, be understood as no more than a superficial mode of cultural projection. In fact, in Cerizza's account, the social, economic and cultural relations that pervade the whole of Boetti's enterprise are never examined for their marked asymmetry – or primarily as a mode of economic exchange.<sup>48</sup> Rather, I argue, the efforts of Cerizza and others to integrate the Boetti enterprise into contemporary Afghan culture through a fiction of influence is but a strategic assertion to claim an authentic origin for the Boettis – without any evidence or proof – and to deflect any other bases for interpretation.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 6. Artist unknown, Illustration of earliest known war rug on exhibition invitation (Reto Christoffel Gallery, Steinmaur, Switzerland), 1982. Wool on wool, Collection Biblioteca Afghanica, Afghanistan-Institut und Archiv, Bubendorf Switzerland.

<sup>47</sup> O'Bannon, 1982, pp. 127-30.

<sup>48</sup> Sauzeau, 2003, p. 86. Described by Sauzeau as an unproblematic business deal: 'He was the person ordering the commission, he paid well, and he appreciated their know-how.'

<sup>49</sup> The most recent catalogue reference to such a connection is in Hamilton, 2012, p. 17.

## Anecdote and ellipsis

Boetti's own contribution to his literature is at best anecdotal and elliptical. In relation to the work made in Afghanistan, it actually begins with the fragmentary texts written in the margins of the *Mappe*. There are four *Mappe* that are dated 1971 listed in the Boetti *Catalogue Raisonné*. The fourth of these, number 362, was shown in the recent Fowler Museum exhibition catalogue *Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women*.<sup>50</sup> The marginal text (literally, the text framing the image) on this particular *Mappa* suggests the beginnings of a kind of autohistoricism. It reads: 'in Kabul with Dastaghir we made something from nothing or to bring the world into the world in 1971 and 1972 and 1970 3 4 5 6 seven 8 9 10 11'. Twenty years later, in a 1992 letter to Rolf Lauter, Boetti recited the origin of these expressions:

I, who had been in a house in Turin only a few hours earlier, now see a caravan pass me by, in the year 1000. And it is I who am given this vision ... I look for a leaf of paper, a very small one, and write on it 'mettere al mondo il mondo' ['bringing the world into the world']. I created that image.<sup>51</sup>

If the 1971-2 date of this *Mappa* is correct, then it is here that the first public expression of these particular figures of speech is to be found.<sup>52</sup> Despite the fact that the associated dates are highly ambiguous, running backwards and forward in time, this fragment of text brings together the two key attitudinal figures that resonate throughout the Boetti literature. In this text his idea of 'making something from nothing' reveals its substantive significance by its conjunction with his expression 'to bring the world into the world'.<sup>53</sup> The first expression is commonly referenced as signifying his "hands-off" approach to the aesthetic considerations of the *Mappe*. There is, however, another equally persuasive reading of the evidence of such anecdotes. In this instance these figures of speech may be understood to be closer to his other observations which indicate that Boetti regarded Afghanistan as a kind of wasteland – an empty world awaiting the world's (that is, his own world's) intervention.

This was not just his immediate reaction – it is, rather, a persistent theme. Twenty years later, in the Bourriaud interview, Boetti explained: 'what fascinates me most is the bareness, the civilization of the desert ... In an Afghan house, for example, there is nothing'.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, he is quoted by Sauzeau in similar terms: 'This is the culture of the desert, where everything is reduced to

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<sup>50</sup> #362 is dated 1971/73 in the *Catalogue Raisonné*, and is in the collection Museo Nazionale delle Arte del XXI, Rome.

<sup>51</sup> From a letter dated March 25, 1992, in Lauter, 1998, pp. 44-5.

<sup>52</sup> Hamilton, 2012, p. 65. The date in the text does not appear to be a production date but one that (in character with others of this period) is referencing the circumstances of its production.

<sup>53</sup> 'Mettere al mondo il mondo' was also the title of the Gian Enzo Sperone & Konrad Fischer exhibition in 1973 (and was derived from the title of one of the Biro works exhibited in this exhibition).

<sup>54</sup> Bourriaud, 1992, p. 50.

zero'.<sup>55</sup> His artist friend Francesco Clemente made the same claim: 'The principal attraction of Afghanistan for Alighiero was its emptiness.'<sup>56</sup> And in a similar vein, Sauzeau cites his reaction when he first saw Afghanistan as if he had 'discovered a country ... in a time warp'.<sup>57</sup> Such attitudes persist in Boetti's perception of antiquity from the moment of his first encounter: 'I find myself facing a thousand-year-old culture'.<sup>58</sup>

In this light, in the combination of his two key aphorisms 'making something from nothing' with 'bringing the world into the world' in the marginal text of the fourth *Mappa*, one finds the foundation of the underlying exoticism inherent in his attitudes towards Afghan culture from his first experience through to the last years of his life.<sup>59</sup> And in another comment, Boetti's views seem to exhibit all the characteristics of a contemporary primitivism:

If it is true, it is the orient, but in this undifferentiated way of putting all the colours together, there are also the traditions, arts and crafts of Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, the Hopis, the Eskimos. That is where you still find a pervasive creativity that has not been organised into roles and spaces as it has been in our culture.<sup>60</sup>

### **Exoticism, primitivism, and orientalism in contemporary art**

Curiously, the nexus between exoticism, primitivism and orientalism is rarely discussed in relation to contemporary art. Despite this, the authors of the Boetti literature go out of their way to deny such a connection. However, the relation between Boetti's accounts of his own contacts with the culture of Afghanistan, and the effects of his artworks in the Euro-American centres of contemporary art suggest otherwise. The character of the Boetti literature, I argue, *itself* constitutes a contemporary form of orientalism. Thus I have taken an inclusive rather than discriminatory approach to the discursive evidence to enable a comprehensive picture of what now constitutes Boetti's art history, insofar as the data exists in many places as it has evolved over time. Very little of it is Boetti's own account, which, as I have demonstrated, is limited to a small number of interviews from the 1970s until 1992. The "literature" is therefore primarily the observations and interpretations of familiars, those connected to the family or the Archive and Foundation, and of journalists, dealers, critics and curators.

Subsequent to his death in 1994, the attitudes expressed by Boetti's various dealers and representatives, plus the anonymous authors at Christie's, each to differing degrees and despite contradictory strategies of denial, all contribute to the posthumous reinforcement of the markedly exoticist character of Boetti's approach to the circumstances of the production of his artworks. The authors of

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<sup>55</sup> Sauzeau, 2003a, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Clemente, 2000, p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Sauzeau, 2003a, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Cerizza, 2008, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> The second expression appears not to have been cited until it appeared in Lauter, 1992 (as the exhibition and catalogue title), where Lauter quotes a letter from Boetti dated March 25, 1992. See Lauter, 1998, pp. 44-5.

<sup>60</sup> Ammann et al., 1996, p. 207.

his literature variously characterise his engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan as if it is with an archaic, romantic, mysterious, culturally “other” and dangerous world, in a manner, I suggest, that begins to construct the framework of a *contemporary* orientalism. This is in keeping with Edward Said’s most general account of his own critique: ‘My objection to what I have called Orientalism is ... that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint ... which observes the Orient from afar, and so to speak, from above.’<sup>61</sup> The cultural and economic vantage point of which Said speaks, being ‘designed for readers and consumers in the metropolitan West’, is entirely apposite to this argument.

The orientalist critique briefly appeared on the stage of cultural criticism in the years following the publication of Said’s landmark study of the topic, first published in 1978. It was, however, overtaken historically by the rhetoric of globalism, and as a consequence orientalism has not occupied a strong place in the discourse of contemporary art. Thus it has taken some years (and the advantage of hindsight) for the relevance of this critique to be recognized in relation to contemporary artistic practice. For instance, in an essay published in 2008 titled ‘On the Road to a State of Grace’, the British art critic Brooks Adams wrote about the artists Boetti, Polke, Clemente and Taafe, describing their journeys to the East as a ‘tale of ... vibrant, easy-to-plunder craft traditions – embroidery, paper-making, miniaturists for hire’ in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.<sup>62</sup> Notwithstanding this (rare) observation, it is arguable that it is the persistence of the multiplicity of the claims of Boetti’s reinvention of textile traditions, as well as the suggestions of his influence over the innovative indigenous forms of carpets – both of which are now commonplace in publications and exhibitions – that have provided the basis for the invention of a contemporary orientalist rhetoric.

However, the denial of such a characterisation continues to appear in the recent literature. In a 2009 essay, the Tate Modern curator of the Boetti retrospective Mark Godfrey made the first of several contradictory accounts of the suggestion of the exoticism inherent in Boetti’s work: ‘his connection to Afghanistan signalled a long-standing relationship between a Western artist and an Eastern culture that was not in any way based on exoticism or colonialist impulses.’<sup>63</sup> Similarly Boetti’s New York agents also sensed the need for this kind of counter-argument. In their press release of February 2010, the Gladstone Gallery suggests that ‘[h]is relationship to Afghanistan was not one of exoticism but rather of admiration: his later works took on a less Westernised character and were infused with the local artisan tradition.’<sup>64</sup> Contradictorily, in his later essay ‘Boetti and Afghanistan’ in the 2011 catalogue for the museum retrospective *Game Plan*, Godfrey claims: ‘It would be misguided to expect that any artist visiting the country during the 1970s could or would make an analysis of Afghanistan’s situation at the time. Nevertheless ... it *did* serve him (at least in the early 1970s) as an ideal and as an “Other” culture to which he could return

<sup>61</sup> Said, 1978, p. 333. This is included as the ‘Afterword’, in the 1995 edition of this work.

<sup>62</sup> Adams, 2008, n.p.

<sup>63</sup> Godfrey, 2009, pp. 204–13.

<sup>64</sup> Gladstone, 2010, n.p.



from time to time.<sup>65</sup> Yet in his recent 2011 monograph on Boetti, Godfrey reverted to his earlier claims: ‘the artist was signalling his clear conviction that Afghanistan should be understood neither as some ‘other’ place untouched by Western civilisation nor as a culture somehow under-developed or ahistorical’.<sup>66</sup> Further, Godfrey speaks of Boetti’s ‘determination not only to travel East, but to work with the peoples he met rather than represent them as an exotic other’.<sup>67</sup> By such a mode of projective logic, Godfrey cleared the way for his relational theory of ‘co-authorship’ as a theoretically correct way around Boetti’s arguably highly problematic relationship with his workers.

### **A contemporary orientalism?**

Based on the evidence of the Boetti literature and contemporary curatorial practice, my argument is that Boetti should be recognised precisely in terms of a contemporary nexus between exoticism and orientalism. The history of Boetti’s twice-yearly visits to Kabul through the 1970s, witnessing firsthand the transitions from kingdom to republic to revolution, followed by invasion and exodus, is the background for his consequent ‘despair at [the] over-modernisation’ of Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> His imaginary elimination of the distance between Rome and Kabul, his embrace of Sufi mysticism, and its visual depiction in bilingual forms of calligraphy, all contribute to the repertoire of exotic effects for his metropolitan audiences. In addition, the massively inequitable exploitation of the circumstances he discovered in Afghanistan and which enabled the production of his artworks, is now lauded by Christie’s as ‘perhaps the first commercial East-West dialogue of the twentieth century’.<sup>69</sup> Such accounts of his relationship to Afghanistan have become progressively more hyperbolic in the Boetti literature.

Cerizza perceived Boetti’s attitude towards such matters as a form of prophecy: ‘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.’<sup>70</sup> And yet the emphasis given by contemporary critics to his distance from the actual circumstances of production, through boundaries, barriers, gender-based exclusion, game-playing, mysticism, and war, plus his dependency on remote agents, contributes, I suggest, to the authors of the literature collectively producing the characteristics of a contemporary orientalism.

And yet, while Boetti does not *literally* represent or romanticise his subjects – in the manner of prior orientalist art – he nonetheless represents *their presence* through the production of forms that are alien at their origins, that is, to their makers, and yet subsequently seen as exotic by their destined audiences. Boetti had indeed fully romanticised his subjects, despite his absolute distance from

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<sup>65</sup> Godfrey, 2011a, p. 157-8.

<sup>66</sup> Godfrey, 2011b, p. 211.

<sup>67</sup> Godfrey, 2011a, p. 156.

<sup>68</sup> Sauzeau, 2003b, p. 85 refers to Boetti’s despair at the encroaching modernity of the Daoud era.

<sup>69</sup> Christie’s, 2011, n.p.

<sup>70</sup> Cerizza, 2009, n.p.

them, according to his one-time partner and gallerist Alessandra Bonomo: ‘he did not have direct contact with the women, yet he deeply admired their invisible, inscrutable presence’;<sup>71</sup> and also, ‘he liked them, their dignity, their pride, their ancient ways’.<sup>72</sup> And so, despite all the attempts to refute an exoticist framework for the production of his *Mappe*, the text-based *Arrazi*, and the encyclopaedic *Tutti*, I suggest that Boetti’s practice in relation to Afghan culture produced something like an *inverted* form of orientalism, as the term is conventionally applied to art history.

By this I mean that despite their scale and the sumptuous effects of their exotic origin, Boetti’s embroidered works both challenge their contemporary metropolitan audiences through their subject matter, materials, and colour effects, and yet they also engage with a process of re-categorising or redefining their viewers’ assumptions and expectations. To the extent that they disturb the viewers’ expectations and sensibilities through their unfamiliar origins, materials, and processes, this occurs in ways and contexts familiar to the avant-gardism characteristic of the 1970s. However, in the sense that these works also exude an aura of excessive abstract labour – through the evidence of endless repetition, stitch by stitch – they produce a particularly contradictory mode of representation whereby their Afghan makers are simultaneously *present* through their embedded labour and yet made *absent* through the nature of Boetti’s iconography. As material objects, they are the epitome of alienated labour. Equally, any political agency ascribed to his subjects – his makers – is negated through their lack of comprehension of the artistic (or commercial) significance of the objects they have produced.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, the *effect* of such a mode of representation is one that is profoundly exotic and alien to both their makers’ and their audiences’ experience.<sup>74</sup> Thus I suggest a conventional orientalist mode of representation remains present in Boetti’s mode of artistic practice, albeit manifested in an avant-gardist reliance on contradiction and inversion. As exemplified by his oft-cited claim, ‘I did absolutely nothing’.<sup>75</sup>

The fact that such aspects of the Boetti art-making enterprise can be represented as socially, economically and culturally unproblematic (if not admirable) is a signal that the potential of the Orient as a concept is still alive and well in the minds of his advocates and biographers. In the account that follows, I seek to demonstrate how such aspects of Boetti’s practice have been interpreted. How they have subsequently been amplified by the art-historical and commercial

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<sup>71</sup> Gute, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> Gute, 2011, p. 107.

<sup>73</sup> If it is arguable that Boetti’s work constitutes an ‘inverted form of orientalism’ other questions arise. By reversing the conventional perspective of orientalism the perspective of maker and viewer can usefully be reversed, producing both new knowledge, as well creating new gaps in our understanding of its outcomes. If these works are to be interpreted as a mode of self-representation, as if the “oriental” is representing herself to a metropolitan viewer, an inversion of the representational perspective of orientalist art has occurred. How then might this new form of textile practice be understood by its makers? How does the maker understand what she has made? How does she understand its intended audience? How does she understand its value? How is her embedded labour (creative or otherwise) recognised? How is she represented in and by the work at its final destination?

<sup>74</sup> In aspects of this discussion of representation I am indebted to Maryam Rashidi’s (unpublished thesis) critique of Grant Kester.

<sup>75</sup> As chosen by Cerizza for the epigraph of his text: quoted in Boatto, 1984, p. 122.

interests we find in the Boetti literature as well as its curatorial analogues is an issue of wider significance to contemporary art history. The commentary on his work, based on the relatively rare autobiographical and anecdotal evidence that have provided the limitations of the analyses and interpretations of Boetti's motivation and method, has become the basis for the transition, as the literature has evolved, from an art historical narrative to an orientalist mythology.

### **Can the *Mappa* be construed as “political” art?**

The degrees of variability that exist within the imagery of the *Mappa* series have attracted attention for their political implications. Within the literature, much has been made of the (relatively few) countries of the world whose flags had actually changed during the period from 1971 to 1994. Only one *Mappa* (the last) depicts the break-up of the Soviet Union, the major geo-political event of the era. In Africa, the transition of the state of South West Africa from South African rule to independence as Namibia in 1990 provided an example of variations in flag design. Godfrey seeks to demonstrate the ‘political’ implications of such representations by illustrating a *Mappa* dated 1979 that shows Namibia depicted in white. This he explained in terms of the profile of the country being left blank ‘for four years’ while a new map was ‘resolved’.<sup>76</sup> Such claims as this make no sense as evidence of Boetti’s political intent, unless he or his map designer Rinaldo Rossi were demonstrating some extraordinary political prescience, in 1978, by somehow anticipating the actual state of independence achieved by Namibia twelve years later.

Speculation such as this feeds an uncritical linkage between Boetti’s enterprise and the kinds of evolutionary political responses that have taken place within the carpet-making tradition and other visual media in Afghanistan. Attempts by contributors to the literature to politicise the significance of the Boetti embroideries cannot be substantiated by suggestions derived from such flimsy connections. By contrast with the war carpets, the actual circumstances of the Afghan population’s forced engagement with what Giddens has termed the ‘dark side’ of modernity – experienced through occupation, brutal force, and the new technologies of warfare, all of which constitutes much of the explicit subject matter of the carpets – is *never* evident in the iconography of Boetti-style embroidery.<sup>77</sup>

The new style of embroidery that Boetti created in 1971-2 was based on the artist’s designs and his capacity to outsource the necessary labour. This produced both a new mode of subcontracting and a new labour method, with outcomes which were unlike anything the traditions of Afghan embroidery had produced before, and which they continued to produce during the 1980s.<sup>78</sup> The manual skill of the embroiderers (their capacity to produce endless analogues of the infill detail of Boetti’s Biro drawings) is derived from their traditional embroidery techniques and materials. Boetti imported the designs to Afghanistan in the form of inscribed and printed textile (linen or muslin) substrates, together

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<sup>76</sup> Godfrey, 2011b, p. 241.

<sup>77</sup> Giddens, 1990 pp. 9-10.

<sup>78</sup> The first attempt to contextualise the issue of ‘tradition’ was made in Bennett, 2012.

with Scottish ‘Coats Anchor’ stranded cotton thread in a myriad of different colours for his workers to use. Except for occasionally being required to make decisions about the use of colour – within parameters set by Boetti – these women’s extraordinary skill in embroidery was exploited primarily as skilled labour, with the capacity to reproduce the same stitch over and over again to realise Boetti’s complex designs: in short, the provision of their skilled labour at refugee camp prices.

### **Political correctness: how, then, is Boetti’s work “political”?**

Despite contemporary accounts in the marketplace, it would seem that Boetti’s work was more politically motivated in the 1960s than in subsequent decades. By 1972, when Mirella Bandini asked Boetti: ‘Has your work had any connection with the social or political situation?’ Boetti had replied: ‘I’ve had no experience of sociocultural or political things.’<sup>79</sup>

In recent texts, however, his one-time gallerist Bonomo is cited relating (unsubstantiated) anecdotes of Boetti’s supposed support for the *mujahideen* through the Northern Alliance, and (even) through contact with its then leader, Ahmed Shah Masood. On such anecdotal evidence, citing Bonomo, Christopher Bennett’s essay in the Fowler exhibition relates how Boetti had visited a medical centre ‘along the border’ where ‘Boetti, who had a habit of carrying large amounts of cash, passed on a considerable sum on the spot to the doctor so that he could purchase the needed anaesthetics.’<sup>80</sup> By 2011, Godfrey elaborates the story: ‘on trips to oversee production in Peshawar he would travel into the mountains to hold meetings with resistance leaders such as Ahmad Shah Masood’, and Godfrey interprets this to indicate that Boetti ‘indirectly funded the resistance through supplying work and paying the embroiderers generously for it’.<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere, Godfrey relates this as ‘clear’ indication of Boetti’s support for the resistance, and even that ‘he saw his support for the Afghans as an echo of his ancestor Sheikh Mansur’s work on behalf of the Chechens, who fought a Russian army two centuries before.’<sup>82</sup>

In his 2009 *Artforum* essay, Godfrey proposed that the relationship between Boetti and his production team enabled a ‘mode of political address’:

what is compelling is the structure of production that allowed political messages to be inserted into the work and then conveyed by the work to a distant audience ... equally innovative was the mode of political address that this production facilitated ... Boetti’s works constituted platforms from which other voices could speak.<sup>83</sup>

The basis for such claims was the first publication of the translation of one of a small number of texts embedded in a small number of the *Arazzi*, which date

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<sup>79</sup> Bandini, 2001, p. 190 (first published in *NAC*, No. 3, March 1973).

<sup>80</sup> Bennett, 2012, p. 59.

<sup>81</sup> Godfrey, 2011b, p. 228. The weight given to the personal and contradictory accounts of familiars in order to elaborate the Boetti story is problematic, to put it mildly.

<sup>82</sup> Godfrey 2011a, p. 173.

<sup>83</sup> Godfrey, 2009, p. 212.



from the late 1980s. In such works one finds the first declarative statements written in Farsi that convey a political narrative. It was not until 2002 that anyone bothered to translate and publish these texts, revealing the following statement:

Our dear homeland, Afghanistan, has not only very pleasant weather but also large mines and all sorts of wonderful fruit. Except for now, because bombardments and gunfire of the Russian infidels, its beautiful landscapes are destroyed and its pleasant weather is poisoned by the application of dangerous gases. The Russians are plundering its oil and gas resources and taking away its agricultural products.<sup>84</sup>

Nobody knows whose words these are, either in this first iteration, or in their subsequent variations. Most likely they belonged to Boetti's middlemen in Peshawar. In a recent Brooklyn Rail editorial 'The Politics of Art' even the eminent art historian Barbara Rose has accepted the prevailing account of Boetti's politics in her reading of the recent MoMA retrospective. Not only does she take as a given the idea that Boetti collaborated with his workers – the women he never met – but that the embedded 'Arabic' texts were 'in fact highly subversive to Western values'. They were neither Arabic nor anti-Western (unless the Soviet Union is taken to represent "the West") and in these few embedded texts from the late 1980s Boetti's Farsi-speaking agents in Peshawar anticipate longingly the end of the decade of Soviet occupation.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

In their analysis of contemporary orientalism, Mary Roberts and Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones have criticised the judgements of a Eurocentric perspective that assume that regional modernisms are inevitably derivative. In their 2005 book *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*, they write:

In recent years, one of the most potent challenges to received histories of European avant-garde visual culture has come from a post-colonial perspective. This standpoint critiques the view that prioritises formal innovation over political contextual considerations and valorises a teleological interpretation of an emergent avant-garde in Europe. A post-colonial analysis also questions a reductive approach to modernism that persistently dismisses regional modernisms as derivative and belated. The dynamic which privileges aesthetic developments in European centres over cultures on the periphery is so defining in this sphere of art-historical inquiry that even those sympathetic to post-colonial critiques often inadvertently perpetuate the reductive assessment or occlusion of regional modernisms.<sup>86</sup>

The Boetti embroiderers' artefacts are not, I suggest, the production of some indigenous postcolonial artistic agency transported in a form recognisable as fine art to the metropolitan centres of influence, as might be deduced from their

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<sup>84</sup> Morsiani, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>85</sup> Rose, 2013, n.p.

<sup>86</sup> Hackforth-Jones, 2005, pp. 5-6.

inclusion in the Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989. Rather they are the products of a culture experiencing ongoing multiple phases of cultural and economic exploitation. As we have seen, Boetti's Afghan enterprise passed through the contexts of kingdom, republic, revolution, occupation and diaspora, which, to his economic advantage, enabled him to access the skills of a subject workforce. Their anonymous, abstracted and mystified representation both in the work and in the literature is, I argue, but the latest version of a contemporary form of orientalism.

If, among other things, globalisation has been described as a trend towards the increasing interconnectedness of social relations across the world, then in the last thirty years Afghanistan was among the least able to participate in such trends. In fact, Boetti's enterprise in Afghanistan captured all the characteristics of the *negative* effects of globalism: that is, the alienation/distanciation of the social network of production from that of its reception is represented, with no postmodern irony intended, by the icon of the world atlas.<sup>87</sup>

Thus with the Boetti enterprise we find an unprecedented instance of the exaggeration of the disparity between the ultimate symbols of wealth (represented by the fine arts in the Western world) and the realities of poverty (the daily circumstances of refugees). Despite the invocations of tradition and otherworldliness as a separate realm, the actual sites of production of Boetti's works (Kabul, Peshawar) were and remain symbolic of conflict and alienation of East from West. One could argue that Afghanistan is in fact the primary exemplar of the negative consequences of globalisation – as an arena in which extra-national forces have always held sway – characterised by porous borders, neighbours with imperial ambitions, illegal trade, terrorism and counter-terrorism, overt and covert military actions, and ongoing ethnic and religious conflicts. It is as if such circumstances created a period of several decades out of phase with the processes of globalist inclusion and conformity occurring elsewhere in the world. It would seem therefore that if the conditions of globalism have produced a shrinkage of time and space, as suggested by Giddens, then the contradictions between pre- and post-modern cultures become magnified in circumstances such as those prevailing in Afghanistan.<sup>88</sup> And in this sense, I suggest that for a metropolitan audience the heightened sense of such contradictions has served to enhance the exotic particularity of the Boetti embroideries.

Should the discourse reviewed here seem bizarre – even accounting for the suspension of disbelief necessary to enter the hyperbolic realm of the contemporary art world – the phenomenon of the evolution of meaning from the basis of such scant historical evidence and fortuitous cultural coincidence can

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<sup>87</sup> Here I adopt the term distanciation as employed by Anthony Giddens, who seeks to demonstrate the consequence of changing concepts of time and space in an increasingly globalised world – identifying *time-space distanciation* as 'the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence.' He argues that in the modern era, the consequences of time-space distanciation is much higher than in any previous period, and the relations between local and distant social forms and events become correspondingly stretched as the coexistent realities of pre-modern and modern cultures is accentuated. Giddens, 1990, p. 14ff. Ruth Watson discusses the *Mappa* series as an icon of globalisation at Watson, 2009, p. 297ff.

<sup>88</sup> Giddens, 1990, p. 14.

now be seen to be exemplified in the case of the Boetti literature. To arrive at an understanding, however, of the forced nexus between both Boetti's *Mappe* and the geographical/war carpet tradition – as if the indigenous tradition has lent authenticity to the cosmopolitan – has necessitated a forensic historiographical examination as is evident in the passages above.

And yet even more elaborate accounts of Boetti's creative method continue to appear, most recently in an essay by Bennett, who attributes an *unconscious* motive to Boetti's original cartoon for the *Mappa*, suggesting that Boetti was 'taking in and unconsciously assimilating something he did not invent'.<sup>89</sup> Thus, effectively, Bennett invites the reader to accept that the creation of the original index (*Planisfero politico*, 1969, the original atlas cartoon from which all subsequent *Mappe* derive) was at the outset a process of *disengagement* from the creative act.<sup>90</sup> This is, however, a disingenuous trope that is implicit throughout the literature. Such a radical denial of authorship (which derived from Boetti's dismissive 1974 comment in relation to the *Mappe* – 'I did absolutely nothing') suggests that the process of outsourcing actually supervenes the material reality of the form of imagery he continued to produce for the next twenty years.<sup>91</sup>

Boetti's avant-gardist gesture of agency-denied in fact remains as nothing more than a variant on his original agential act, which was subsequently perpetuated at the hands of others for the next quarter-century. And, as I have demonstrated above, it is now a commonplace in the literature for such a construction of the artist's practice to carry the implication that these types of strategies were not only meaningful in the Euro-American contexts of the reception of his works, but also that the circumstances of production of the works had an influential impact in the cultural context of their origin. To the contrary, and by contrast, for most Afghan people it was the experience of the advanced technology of late-twentieth-century warfare – Giddens's 'dark' modernity – that was the most dramatic and significant of the many aspects that marked the advent of the modern in Afghanistan from the 1950s onwards. It is therefore arguable that it is the genre of the war carpet that should be recognised as the exemplary genre constituting modern Afghan artistic culture, and that the suggestions that such forms of innovation are derivative of Boetti's influence is no more than the posthumous exaggeration of Boetti's original avant-garde gamesmanship.

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<sup>89</sup> Bennett, 2012, p. 35.

<sup>90</sup> Objectively, in its origin, the 1969 cartoon *Planisfero politico* was a set of design decisions or formulae that invented a holistic view of the nations of the world, and which became the model for each subsequent variation and manifestation produced by his outworkers.

<sup>91</sup> Boetti, 1974, quoted in Boatto, 1984, p. 122, cited in Cerizza, 2008, p. 1, and in another translation, in Godfrey, 2011b, p. 237.

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