

MEL BOCHNER AND ALIGHIERO BOETTI *Verba Volant Scripta Manent*

by Kara L. Rooney

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The language of the trickster is always duplicitous, simultaneously pointing toward meaning and away from it. Duchamp famously said, “I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste,” while Oscar Wilde, master of the ironic turn, wrote, “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.” Doubleness, contradiction, and paradox—these are the trickster’s mother tongues, the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence. *Verba Volant Scripta Manent* (“Words Fly Away—What is Written Remains”), the inaugural exhibition of Totah Gallery, features the work of that other most notorious conceptual rabble-rouser, Alighiero e Boetti and his American contemporary, Mel Bochner. In a veritable boxing match of words, color, and material, these artists play at a high-stakes game of wits, one in which meaning itself is put into question and our relationship to communicative form irrevocably challenged.

This is the first time Boetti and Bochner's works have been shown side by side, a rather surprising fact given their aligned interests and material overlaps. As a means of elucidating these terms, Totah's curation focuses on two specific bodies of work: for Boetti, his *Arazzi*, or "word squares," a project the artist undertook from 1971 until his death in 1994; for Bochner, a new series of text paintings, extensions of his experiments on velvet initially begun in 2005. Their meeting point is both apparent and subtle, with each Conceptualist mining the seductive quality of color as lure.



Alighiero e Boetti, *Le infinite possibilità di esistere*, c. 1990. Embroidery on fabric. 14 x 14 inches.

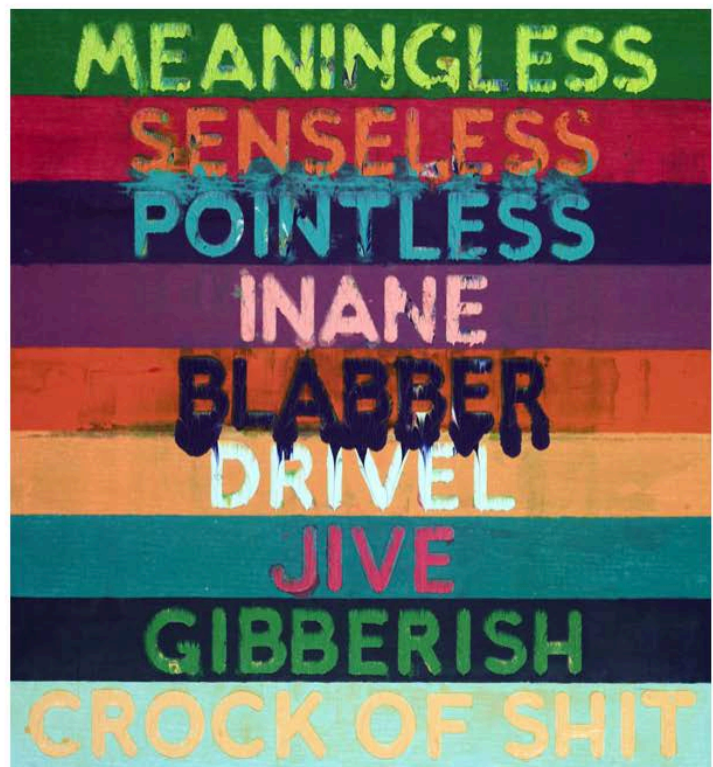
With the *Arazzi*, color resides in the hands of the Afghan women who for more than twenty years, first as residents of Afghanistan and later as refugees in Peshawar, meticulously hand-embroidered Boetti's colloquial, sometimes numinous phrases, often inspired by Sufi poetry or the artist's own writings. At times, the alliterative connection between palette and text operate in near perfect harmony: *il silenzio è d'oro* (*Silence is Golden*) (1988) and *Da figura a veritas* (*From Form to Truth*) (1982), for example, shine respectively with their gold, ebony, and off-white palettes; at others, including the hot hued scheme of *Sciogliersi come neve al sole* (*To Melt like Snow in the Sun*) (1987), they seem diametrically opposed.

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Each *Arrazi* features the distinctive stamp of their female “author,” located not only in her choice of palette, but in her embroidery technique. Small irregularities—such as the marginally right slanting weave in the top register of *Tra l’incudine e il martello* (*Between a Rock and a Hard Place*) from 1988, or the subtle warp and weft of *Il progressivo svanir della consuetudine* (*The Gradual Vanishing of Habit*) (1990)—lend a sense of humanness to the otherwise serial works. Positioned in clusters throughout the gallery, they hum with a quiet but commanding auditory buzz.

Boetti’s longstanding interest in the textile tradition of Afghanistan was first born out of his work in the region with the *Mappas*, large vibrant embroidered works that annotated shifting geopolitical territories as well as cultural and artistic boundary-crossing. With the *Arazzi*, Boetti extended his interest in twinning and duality where the co-authorship of these diminutively sized compositions simulate a dialectic exchange between the self and other, control and chance. Evocative pieces such as *La persona e il personaggio* (*The Person and the Personage*) (1985) and *A come*

Alighiero B come Boetti (*A like Alighiero B like Boetti*) (1988) highlight such thematic concepts, acting both as self-portraits and collective identities informed by the aesthetic sensibility and interaction of many, in this case, Afghani women. With these clever word grids Boetti undermines the notion of a fixed and stable self, replacing the individual with dynamic evolutionary potential.



Mel Bochner, *Meaningless*, 2015. Oil on velvet. 51 × 46 inches.

Bochner's recent paintings, as opposed to Boetti's more silent incantations, bellow from the walls. Near the entrance to the gallery, *Thank You* (2015) and *Go Away* (2012) face off against one another in a textural shouting match, the latter a conflation of gooey turquoise, Prussian blue, and sea foam gray; the former, a candy-colored carnival of fuchsia, lavender, and acid green. *Eradicate* (2015) and *Meaningless* (2015) point to the more existential limits of language, where invoked absence produces a plurality of readings. Far from the philosophical posturing of theory that exists above human speech, however, Bochner's use of satire emphasizes the often meaningless, base, and inessential emergence of ideas *from* life. His choice of velvet amplifies the works' terrestrial quality, triangulating its material dimension somewhere between opulence, pop culture, and kitsch. As a painterly support, it also positions Bochner's practice in concert with Boetti's, whose workshop in Peshawar was located a mere 323 kilometers from velvet's place of origin, Kashmir.

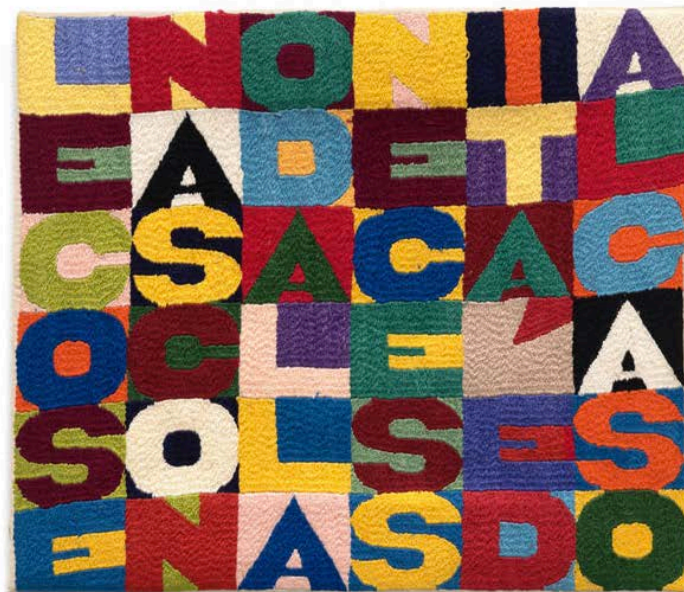
In the striking catalogue created for the show, Bochner describes the painterly process of these works, where too the artist's hand is removed in favor of chance:

In my paintings on velvet, the paint is delivered indirectly to the surface. First a computer-controlled laser engraves the text into an acrylic sheet, which will serve as a printing matrix. Then, letter-by-letter, the words are hand-filled with pure oil paint, sometimes up to a pound per letter. Finally the velvet is laid face down on the plate, placed in a hydraulic press, and subjected to 750 tons of vertical pressure.

These unruly variables result in viscous pools of paint, letters oozing into one another in lush, unpredictable ways: "delete" morphs into "purge," "blabber" into "drivel." The text, like life, bleeds out to the edge of the frame, leaving us with nowhere to go except in.

But while the material synchronicity of practices provokes, it is in the collision of language that this juxtaposition of oeuvres truly sings. Bochner says he is often asked what the *Blah Blah Blah* (2015) paintings mean, a question to which his response is “must everything mean something?” One could imagine Boetti responding with the same sly retort. *Pisciarsi in bocca* (*Pissing in My Own Mouth*) (1979)

acknowledges a similar distrust for speech exhausted by overuse, where the brutal vulgarity of slang is the only genuine form of communication left.



Alighiero Boetti, *Le cose nascono dalla necessita e dal caso*, 1988. Embroidery on fabric. 11.8 × 13.7 inches.

In their disarming use of humor and Socratic questioning, both Bochner and Boetti use language to create language. Like Nauman’s neon proclamations of the “True Artist” or Deborah Kass’s brightly rendered pop historical puns, the letterform, in all of its material complexity, constructs a mode of entry for perception that extends beyond the parameters imposed by common linguistic exchange. Through its exposition of the vernacular, poetic and profane, *Verba Volant Scripta Manent* foregrounds the social, conventional, and political aspects of speech as well as the closed structural systems that define human interaction. In this provocative pairing we find Boetti and Bochner, like the tricksters they are, at the borderline between sign and referent. Together, their work reclaims language, rescuing it from the tiredness of speech, and renewing it with associations of divine origin, where the word once had the power to transform. To quote Boetti’s small but striking work from 1990: *Le infinite possibilità di esistere*.

CONTRIBUTOR

Kara L. Rooney

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