

Eugenio Dittborn

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989

photo silkscreen, acrylic and thread
on polyester fabric with printed
envelopes inscribed with ink

3 panels: 140 x 215 6
envelopes: 62 x 41

Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 92.51a-i



Eugenio Dittborn

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989

Artist's Biography

Nationality: Chilean

Born: 1943, Santiago, Chile

Eugenio Dittborn has a significant international presence as a leading Latin American artist who has been featured in numerous international group exhibitions. From the Chilean capital of Santiago where they originate, Dittborn's Airmail Paintings have traveled via international post to exhibition venues worldwide since 1983. Initially working under the isolation of the military dictatorship in Chile, Dittborn found a way to disguise his artwork, bypass the bureaucratic system and engage in the activities of the international art world by sending his items to galleries around the world. He silkscreens, paints, photographically prints and embroiders onto inexpensive, lightweight fabric and then folds the material for travel in cardboard airmail envelopes. The itineraries of each are written onto the envelopes which are displayed along with the unfolded work. The journeys, the distances spanned and the strategies uses to communicate are very much part of the work.

The subjects of the Airmail Paintings also address and make visible a variety of experiences that are forgotten or suppressed by official histories. Alongside authoritative sources, such as police records or historical photographs, Dittborn adds personal imagery, such as a photograph of his newborn daughter or images from mass media, such as a newspaper transcript of a woman's tale of surviving an earthquake. The artist says that his work is "a way of salvaging my previous work, which was threatened, like every other cultural production in Chile in these last years, with oblivion. Power in our country constructs a social, political and cultural space which is characterized by a monstrous capacity to empty and exclude any possibility of memory. My artistic work puts itself forward, in its travels, as a little model of a possible memory." The Airmail Paintings specifically produce alternative perspectives to Chile's history of colonial rule, Pinochet's dictatorship, and its current society, but the work also connects with contemporary art movements that recover the complexity of local histories and give voice to suppressed perspectives. His subtle political critique is all the more powerful because the works have a delicate, vulnerable and transitory quality similar to the information they convey.

Artistic Context

Nationality: Chilean

Training: Escuela de Bellas Artes of the Universidad de Chile, Santiago; Escuela de Fotomecánica, Madrid; Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, Berlin; École des Beaux-Arts, Paris

Peers: Cildo Meireles; Gonzalo Diaz; Arturo Duclos

Group: screenprinting; Correspondence Art; 20th century; 21st century

Provenance: the artist

Subject: Chilean history and political culture; suppressed histories; found imagery

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Other Works in the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

Eugenio Dittborn

La XI Historia del Rostro (500 anos)—*Airmail Painting No. 91*, 1991
paint, stitching, photo screenprint and envelopes on non-woven fabric

Gift of Lloyd's of London

VAG 99.41 a-u



Bibliography

Out of Place

Publication

1993

[transcription]

"Many were caught sleeping and awake in another world. Others who woke up suddenly, were locked in more by their own confusion than by any lack and key, or because they couldn't find the key, they were buried by falling walls or suffocated by the dust. Miraculously, many found refuge in the midst of the worst danger, because as the walls collapsed to the outside, they were saved by the woodwork, which sheltered them between the spaces, creating a vault."

P. Diego de Rosale

"The planet is full of collective apparitions, like Canada, Brazil, the Swiss Congo, and the Common Market."

Jorge Luis Borges, 1975

Conversations between Eugenio Dittborn born and Roberto Merino (1989-1990)

Wednesday, 11 October, 1989

RM One often speaks—in relation to your work—about a certain precariousness of means, about your having given up the pretence of expensive ostentation in works which are, after all, of large format. In a catalogue, Pablo Oyarzún talks about "a kind of financial indisposition." It seems to me that this precariousness is a basic structural feature, an element that goes without saying: it is in the subtext, not an issue of content. I even think there might be a certain identity between precariousness and necessity. I'm talking about a principle of necessity of means and techniques. In this way, precariousness, which is also a constituent feature of our national life, is cited in your work, if not explicitly.

ED Various things occur to me, for example, you might understand the precariousness in my work as the fact that the elements which are connected are provisionally connected. If, for example, you stick one piece of non-woven fabric over another, you can" unstitch it, unstick it, pull it apart. None of the means I use to stick things together allows you to do it definitively. So, that is what the provisional character of the inscriptions is about, and therefore, of the connections.

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RM Therefore, the meaning of the work is an issue in parenthesis ...

ED In a condition in which you can keep on making comments about the meaning, and go on dedlating [delaying] a conclusion, not intending any definitive meaning.

RM So, we could apply the word "precariousness," which I was just using, to this.

ED The precarious is something which can fall or be taken to pieces at any given moment, something provisional, and therefore transitory.

RM Another issue that interests me very much, that I even find quite beautiful, and which I feel must be one of the essential points of emotion (or of tension) in your work, is this: how the journey, or its motif, or the motif of travel, is inscribed, without explicit indication, in the unspoken elements of the work. First, in the selection of material (non-woven fabric), which requires certain conditions for packing and sending, and then, in the fact of the folds, which I have related to the cracking of Duchamp's *Large Glass*.



ED Which is a sign of travel.

RM An intervention of chance.

ED Maybe it's the early intervention of destiny. An accidental encounter that leaves a mark.

RM In the Airmail Paintings, the folds are not innocent marks because they are signs that are meant to be exhibited in the unfolding.

The printed and stitched faces contained in the 11th History of the Human Face are: 19 mugshots of Chilean men and women thieves published in a criminology magazine of the thirties, found by Dittborn fourteen years ago in Santiago, Chile; 16 faces of aborigines from Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost region of South America (Selknam, Yamana and Alakawulup tribes) photographed by Martin Gusinde, a German anthropologist who lived among them, in the twenties, faces that Dittborn found in 41 book written by Gusinde.

From the inscription written by Eugenio Dittborn on one envelope for *The 11th History of the Human Face (500 years) 1991*

ED In epic poetry, oil the intermediate destinations that the hero arrives at—before getting to the end—are the result of the intervention of all those forces trying to prevent the hero from arriving at his final destination (destiny?): the Sirens, the Cyclops, Cerberus; these are the obstacles. So, in the case of the *Large Glass*, it was the mark of the obstacles; it was as though the obstacles left their mark. Now, with the Airmail Paintings, it is the reverse: these marks—the folds—are precisely what makes transit possible, they are the condition of possibility for transit.

RM Turning to other things, what relation is there between the faces which appear in *The 6th History of the Human Face*? That is to say, between the child's pre-pictorial drawing, the police sketch or identikit, the ID photo, the



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photographs of Indians, the faces from how-todraw books, and those taken from anonymous drawings, found in diaries, notebooks, magazines.

ED To find faces that are at a maximum distance from one another. A certain vertigo is produced by these abysses, these jumps from one face to the next, from one technique to another, and between the different places in which I found each face. So that as each Airmail Painting travels, there are journeys within the work itself: the enormous distances between one face and the next. Antipodes abruptly placed into contact.

RM When I was referring earlier to emotion, I was talking about the way in which that abyss is cited, how that abyss of travel is an unspoken part of the work itself.

ED Like a lateral phenomenon.

RM Like something implicitly understood. And the emotion is in that possibility of something that is beyond the signs inscribed in the work to be read and decoded.

ED One could talk about the emotion of the folds.

RM Or about the excitement of the canvas. Do you remember that we once talked about the English word "canvas"—which is used for a painting on (canvas) linen, for the soil of a boot, and also for the floor of the boxing ring?

What are you working on at this precise moment?

ED I'm going to start working with a hanged man by Goyo, one of the *Capriccios*, called "Hunting for Teeth." It shows a woman who is stealing the gold fillings out of the hanged man's mouth, covering her nose with o[a] handkerchief, because he is completely putrefied, but she is intent on getting out those gold fillings. One could speak of a gold peculiar to excluded places. One of the things that runs through all visual experimentation is the search for gold, in remote places. And what is most intensely sought after in this practice is, precisely, the glint of it in unlikely places. I think that the voyage of the Airmail Paintings reformulates the entire question of gold. By displacing it, gold is suddenly devalued.

RM By transferring it publicly.

ED By making it go from hand to hand at the risk of being lost.

Monday, 16 October, 1989

RM Your work, which crosses space, also freely crosses time and its signs. One might say that from moments in time that are more or less remote—1976, 1977—a system of references in transformation has been unfolding, a self-referential history. In your work neither the idea of fashion nor the idea of progress exists, nor even the need—pathetic, because one always likes to dissimulate—to be up-to-date. I have the impression that this attitude is driven by a general concept of work.

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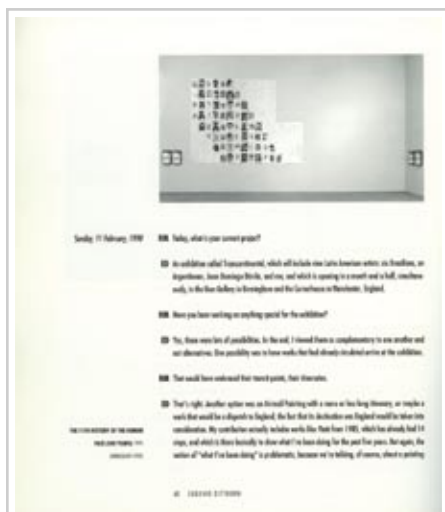
ED I would like to amplify your statement "In your work, the idea of fashion does not exist." It doesn't, it's true. The idea of fashion (*moda*) is not in my work. And yet, fashion is also there. Refashioned (*modificada*).

RM A few years ago, they had to prohibit tourists from entering some of the ancient rock caves in France because the carbon dioxide of their exhalations was ruining the paintings. This was shown on television, on the Ripley program. On the other hand, a work made for posterity, like Leonardo's *Last Supper* lasted for centuries in the refectory where it was, resisting the onslaughts of damp in a place that was flooded for much of the time. Again, during the Napoleonic invasion, the French soldiers entertained themselves during their free time throwing stones at the heads of the *Twelve Apostles*. Centuries before, another work of Leonardo's, the giant clay horse that was the model for the bronze equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza, was also destroyed by French soldiers. It is very strange when the closed world of the work of art is invaded like this—inundated so violently by the everyday



world. And it is also curious that dust—both domestic and metaphysical—should have painted itself over Rembrandt, turning the group portrait of the *Night Watch* into a nocturnal scene. I imagine that the Airmail Paintings have their defence systems, given that they are made to be placed in the exterior world, to be moved about and manipulated by it, and they even enter the international mail system—with its strikes, its delays, its negligence, and its hazards—and they survive.

ED The fragility of the Airmail Paintings manages to pass through the entire international mail network, and the paintings invariably arrive on time, and in perfect condition at their destinations. What I am trying to say here is that the mail is not only what you say it is (on strike, delayed, negligent, and full of hazards), but it is also the complete opposite: expeditious, efficient, and humorous—it always makes the automatic joke of carrying the Airmail Paintings to their destination and then the superior joke of returning them to the sender. To put it another way, the Airmail Paintings travel in envelopes. These host them, hide them, carry them. They accredit them, certify them, and send them on their way. What can you say about an Airmail Painting asleep in an envelope at 0315, local time in the airport at Papeete, Tahiti, in the interior of a Boeing belonging to Qantas or UTA or LanChile, while here in Santiago it is 2015 of the previous day and in Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, and the next landing point of that Airmail Painting on its way to Sydney, it is 1215 of the following day?

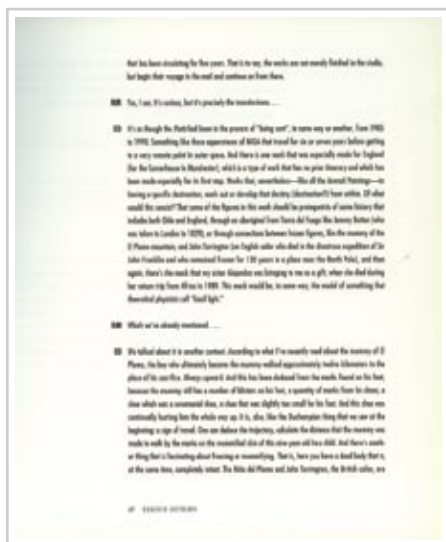


Once the trip is finished, the receiver at the destination opens the envelopes, the paintings are unfolded, they are hung on the walls, and are exhibited along with the envelopes. And then, in this moment, the entire trajectory actually takes place: by being suspended. Like the blood which pours from a cut.

RM People are talking so much about marginalization, in every possible area, and your work presents an enormous gallery of marginal figures: muggers, petty thieves and swindlers, pickpockets, victims, aborigines. We are in a very complicated territory here, and a delicate one as well, because in trying to recuperate marginal figures one is always in danger of recreating a power relation in which the artist would be—at the least—more protected by the sort of security inherent in his/her strange social position. In your case, you have specific ways—in the choice of faces for example—of avoiding the scientist's arrogance or the romantic's fetishism. We've talked about how in your work what is restored is more a relationship between power and the subject.

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ED By citing police photos of criminals and delinquents of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s in my work, I've tried to explore a specific and contradictory relationship: the collision between the police camera, the

camera that is properly the power of the state working visually, and the faces of small-time Chilean criminals, men and women who are, mostly, transplanted and impoverished peasants. The visual document of this collision is a photograph which, along with the name, the false names, all the aliases, certain physical characteristics, and brief biographical notes, etc., makes up the dossier of the subject photographed. Such records were published in *El Detective*, a criminology and police science magazine, published by the Bureau of Investigation between about 1925 and 1950. What marginality can you speak of when dealing—in the case of the police records in question—not with faces in their outcast and extraterritorial immediacy, but instead with the photographic plates annexed to penal records, all of this produced by the state in order to exercise control over and over again?

Putting it another way, might it not be marginality itself that the power of the state robs from these robbers? Without the margin or the centre, they end up inhabiting and acting, paradoxically, in the only space they have left: the photos in their files. They are the photos in their files. I have not been well understood on this point. I have not been working with marginal criminals but with the petrified and precise instant of their subordination by the power—the photographic power—of the state and its printed multiplication. Isn't this instant also the abrupt *modernization* of the face of the underworld?

Saturday, 18 November, 1989

RM It is important to try to specify the role that the receiver has with respect to the Airmail Paintings, the subject who scans the paintings and who at some moment must feel his gaze making contact with the others—with the printed ones (the eyes, for example, of the criminals and the aborigines who appear in the *Histories of the Human Face*). It's really impressive the way those printed eyes, those signs of the one who is looking, connect with the gaze of the spectator. What is reproduced, what is enlarged on the surface of the synthetic fabric is a photograph, and, as such, is also a suspended relation in an instant of time between that face and the camera that confronted it. That suspended situation—in the moment of the unfolding and the exhibition—comes to completion.

ED Exactly. It is because of this that there are light years between the gaze of those who arrive printed and that of the receivers in different places around the world.

RM Also, there would be the "airmailness" of the gaze. These printed gazes are equivalent to the *fossilized light*—the light that reaches us from the stars long after they have been extinguished—that you have sometimes mentioned.

ED Yes, they are. The criminals keep looking at the camera of the state, but neither they nor the camera exist any longer: their looks continue travelling, but they are no longer looking.

RM And these gazes carry on, changing their vehicles: from the magazines to the Airmail Paintings.

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ED An Airmail Painting is the space in which these times meet one another. In this scene, the hybridization in my work is a temporal hybridization. Signs that belong to different and distant temporal strata finally meet there, and in meeting, make one another reciprocally visible. This also has to do with mediation, that is, with that which makes transfer possible and which travels in order to transfer particular questions. For example, in the *Pieta* the first mediation would be the TV screen on which erupted the image of Benny Kid Paret lying in agony on the canvas at Madison Square Garden. A UPI photographer photographed the scene from the TV screen, and later the UPI sent this photo to the Chilean magazine *Gol y Gol* which printed and published it. A copy of this magazine ended up 15 years later in a secondhand bookstore where I found it in 1977. I worked for a relatively long time with this photograph, reprinting it many times. Finally, in the last six years I have used this same photo in a few of the Airmail Paintings. I have a special fascination with images that carry the traces of their successive transfer or signs of their travels, as we have already seen. The figure of Benny Kid Paret, dying from the punches of Emile Griffith, was contained on the TV screen, and then a photograph contained the agonized figure of Benny Kid Paret televised. Finally, a magazine printed and

published the multimedia-ized figure of the Cuban boxer. That is the model: in the object itself are visibly, visually inscribed, all the mediations that contained and transferred it: all its layers.

RM I wanted to go back to the issue of the photo encountered in a magazine. There is nothing else possible, nothing other than dispatching this found object in order to maintain it as such. The Airmail Painting is not, however, an ultimate destination. Things come together in it, make themselves seen, and at the same time, have to continue circulating.

ED Sure, it is as if it was a punishment. This is how they seem.

RM Like a penance ...

ED The penance is to be permanently in movement.

RM Like souls that have no resting place.

ED They have no house and no destiny. All destinations are the house.

RM There is another issue I would like to discuss, which is the following. In the text for the catalogue to your exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney (October 1989), the Airmail Paintings are described as "evading the imperatives of the art market ... [they] arrive to unfold and to occupy a substantial amount of the hotly contested space of the cultural metropolis." Now, this question is an important one: how by means of airmailness can one totally avoid that sort of pyramid of desires and fantasies that accompany the exhibition of one's actual works in the metropolis? In other words, the way in which your painting converts the metropolis into a place of transit, since from there it is soon sent on to another place of transit, giving the metropolis a status equivalent to the place of origin. The metropolis is no longer the place of arrival, the supreme summit of the artist's career.

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ED This is very much to the point, what you're saying, and I think you are absolutely right. I want to add that the Airmail Paintings, so small in their envelopes, deceive the agents of the metropolis. They say: "Is it a letter? Yes, that's what it is. It's a bit big, but go ahead, no problem."

RM Dealing with letters, there is no problem at all.

ED It's the idea of the Trojan Horse. These guys say: OK, it's a letter. And when you open it, unfold it, and hang it, the Airmail Paintings effectively come "to occupy a substantial amount of the hotly contested space of the cultural metropolis."

RM A part of the vital space of the metropolis.

ED So, probably, what is specific about the Airmail Paintings is that they are a ruse, as the poets say. What's the ruse? It's that the Airmail Paintings are paintings disguised as letters. For this reason they can infiltrate. In this sense they have a viral character. They work with a viral notion of war.

RM What would be the opposite of the viral war?

ED The opposite to the viral war would be the declaration of war. Because viruses don't declare war.

RM They just start it.

ED It's not only that they start the war, but that they start it retrospectively. [laughter] Yes, and then, when the Airmail Paintings come back, the agents of the metropolis say "Aaggh, it's too late." [more laughter]

Sunday, 11 February, 1990

RM Today, what is your current project?

ED An exhibition called *Transcontinental*, which will include nine Latin American artists: six Brazilians, an Argentinean, Juan Domingo Dávila, and me, and which is opening in a month and a half, simultaneously, in the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and the Cornerhouse in Manchester, England.

RM Have you been working on anything special for the exhibition?

ED Yes, there were lots of possibilities. In the end, I viewed them as complementary to one another and not alternatives. One possibility was to have works that had already circulated arrive at the exhibition.

RM That would have embraced their transit points, their itineraries.

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ED That's right. Another option was an Airmail Painting with a more or less long itinerary, or maybe a work that would be a dispatch to England, the fact that its destination was England would be taken into consideration. My contribution actually includes works like *Pietà* from 1985, which has already had 14 stops, and which is there basically to show what I've been doing for the past five years. But again, the notion of "what I've been doing" is problematic, because we're talking, of course, about a painting

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that has been circulating for five years. That is to say, the works are not merely finished in the studio, but begin their voyage in the mail and continue on from there.

RM Yes, I see. It's curious, but it's precisely the transitoriness...

ED It's as though the Rod had been in the process of "being sent", in some way or another, from 1985 to 1990. Something like those apparatuses of NASA that travel for six or seven years before getting to a very remote point in outer space. And there is one work that was especially made for England (for the Cornerhouse in Manchester), which is a type of work that has no prior itinerary and which has been made especially for its first stop. Works that, nevertheless—like all the Airmail Paintings—in having a specific destination, work out or develop that destiny (destination?) from within. Of what would this consist? That some of the figures in this work should be protagonists of some history that includes both Chile and England, through an aboriginal from Tierra del Fuego like Jemmy Button (who was taken to London in 1829), or through connections between frozen figures, like the mummy of the El Plomo mountain, and John Torrington (an English sailor who died in the disastrous expedition of Sir John Franklin and who remained frozen for 130 years in a place near the North Pole), and then again, there's the mask that my sister Alejandro was bringing to me as a gift, when she died during her return trip from Africa in 1989. This mask would be, in some way, the model of something that theoretical physicists call "fossil light."

RM Which we've already mentioned....

ED We talked about it in another context. According to what I've recently read about the mummy of El Plomo, the boy who ultimately became the mummy walked approximately twelve kilometers to the place of his sacrifice. Always upward. And this has been deduced from the marks found on his feet, because the mummy still has a number of blisters on his feet, a quantity of marks from his shoes, a shoe which was a ceremonial shoe, a shoe that was slightly too small for his foot. And this shoe was continually hurting him the whole way up. It is, also, like the Duchampian thing that we saw at the beginning: a sign of travel. One can deduce the trajectory, calculate the distance that the mummy was made to walk by the marks on the mummified skin of this nine-year-old Inca child. And there's another thing that is fascinating about freezing or mummifying. That is, here you have a dead body that is, at the same time, completely intact. The Niñito del Plomo and John Torrington, the British sailor, are

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very important, I think, to my work—not only because they represent a similar fate as frozen bodies, but because they permit access to particular experiences, both personal and collective, that have been arrested. That is, they have not been allowed to dissolve, in the sense that they have not been allowed to deteriorate, and they are still pending or suspended and conserved. These frozen bodies are a variant of fossilization and embalment.

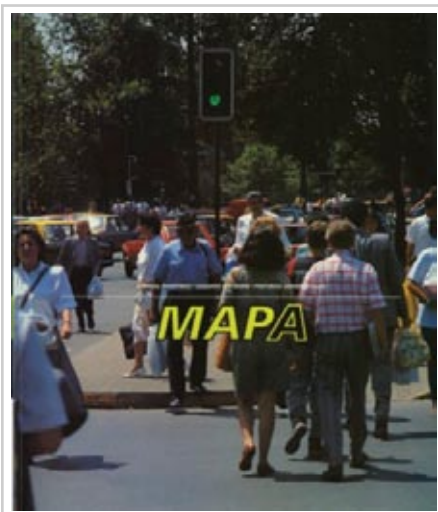
RM So, now what are you working on specifically for Manchester? Are you going back to working with Jemmy Button?

ED Yes, in *To Travel, Travelled, Travelled, Travelling*. The figure of Torrington also appears in this work, as well as the mask that my sister brought back from Africa and the mummy of the Cerro El Plomo. The work also includes Chilean and English newspapers from January 31, 1990.

RM Newspapers of the some date?

ED They are from the day I turned 41. They were purchased both here and there. There are a variety of things of a temporal order that are synchronized in the work. There's the date that Button left and the date he came back (1829-1834). Then, there is the date that they discovered Torrington two years ago (having been frozen for 138 years), and then the date the 1,450-year-old pre-Colombian mummy was discovered (1962); and then there's this recent thing, which is the arrival of the mask that Alejandro bought for me (1989); and there is the day of my birthday. I referred to it in our conversation of Saturday, November 18, 1989 when I said that the hybridization in my work was of a temporal kind and that signs come together that belong to different and widely separated strata of time. They encounter each other in the Airmail Painting and make one another visible, reciprocally.

Roberto Merino is a poet who lives and works in Santiago de Chile. The conversations were translated by Claudia Rousseau.



Mapa
Publication
1993

[transcription of excerpt]

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Further Reading

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La Cuisine et la Guerre: Seven Airmail Paintings. Houston: Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2001.

Eugenio Dittborn: In an Instant and with Davestating Fury, 4 New Airmail Paintings. Miami: Centre for Fine Arts, 1993.

From Another Periphery: 10 Airmail Paintings. Sydney: Artspace, 1984.

Paschal, Huston and Linda Johnson Dougherty. *Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight*. Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2003.

Philippi, Desa. "Distance of memory: the Airmail Paintings of Eugenio Dittborn," *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*. 83 (1996): 14-19

Witness. North Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 1993.

Zamudio, Raúl. "Eugenio Dittborn," *ArtNexus*. 54.3 (2004): 155-156.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Out of Place. October 23, 1993 - January 17, 1994.

Classified Materials: Accumulations, Archives, Artists. September 24, 2005 - January 2, 2006.

75 Years of Collecting: Portrait of a Citizen. September 23, 2006 - January 1, 2007.

Selected Exhibitions Outside of the Vancouver Art Gallery

Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney. *Eugenio Dittborn: Transperiferia*. 1989.

Havana, Cuba. *III Bienale de la Habana*. 1989.

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Archival History

Acquisitions Justification

Acquisition Record

1992

[transcription]

Dittborn, Eugenio b. 1943, Santiago, Chile

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino) 1989

Photo silkscreen acrylic and thread on polyester fabric with

printed envelopes inscribed in ink

three panels: 140 x 215 cm each

three envelopes 62 x 41 x 1.5 cm each

Vendor: The Artist

Eugenio Dittborn lives and works in Santiago, Chile. His work is being exhibited widely in exhibitions such as *Trans-Continental - Nine Latin American Artists* in Birmingham and Manchester in 1990, the 4th Havana Bial held in Cuba in 1991 and most recently, he exhibited in DOCUMENTA IX. In 1993, Dittborn will have major solo exhibitions at Witte de With in Rotterdam and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

Since 1984, Dittborn has engaged in producing what he describes as *Airmail Paintings*. These works generally comprise multiple parts, They are produced on synthetic non-woven material, a material usually used as an inner-liner for padding mattresses or clothes. On the surface he paints, silkscreens, photographically prints and often stitches or embroiders. Each sheet is then folded and placed into its specifically designed envelope and sent via airmail to its place of exhibition. On their arrival they are taken out, unfolded, and hung with their shipping envelopes. The envelopes hung alongside the paintings list the chronology of the paintings previous journeys and exhibition history.

Dittborn's Airmail Paintings are, on one level, strategies he has adopted to enable his works participate in a cultural dialogue beyond Chile. Using minimal resources and working at what can be referred to as a cultural periphery, his works are easily transported and able to make strong visual statements from a fragile and transitory material base. Dittborn is interested in the fact that the transportation of works of art is usually ignored with more attention placed on exhibitions. Dittborn's Airmail Paintings endeavour to bring forward the experience of the journey and evoke other journeys and memories. He works from found imagery and the resources he has accumulated throughout his life. In *The Ill History of the Human Face*, you have images from widely different social sources including mug shots, and excerpts from drawings produced by his daughter, Margarita. He combines them on a folded surface to produce unexpected and moving experiences. Dittborn himself, referring to *The Airmail Paintings*, links the enormous journeys and the tremendous gulfs within the interior of the work by linking the disparate images which he feels are parallels to the recorded notations of the paintings as they have travelled throughout the world.

Dittborn Eugenio P. 2

Dittborn's work comes out of a period of intense activity by an artistic avant-

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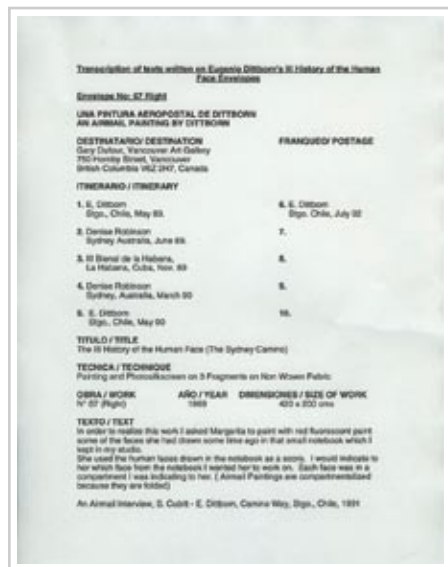
garde in Latin America which began in the mid 1960's. His work often takes up political themes and can be seen as developing upon the imperative set forth by Brazilian artist, Helio Oiticica who wrote of the "necessity of complete participation by the poet, the artist, the intellectual in general, in the events and problems of the world refusing to restrict oneself to aesthetic problems."

Dittborn has produced an extended series on the History of the Human Face and *The III History of the Human Face (The Sydney Camino)* is a very good example. This work has been exhibited at the 4th Havana Bienal in Cuba as well as in Sydney, Australia. It is often not realized how Latin American artists embrace strategies that we think of as our own. In his case a conceptually based photo-text practice. I feel that the addition of this work to the collection would join with works by Ian Wallace, Mary Kelly, Christian Botanski, Angela Graverholz, Thomas Ruff, Arnaud Maggs and others, each of which address the questions of history and identity, many of which use portraits. His work adds breadth to our ability to represent this important area of focus for artists throughout the past two decades.

Recommend purchase.

Gary Dufour
Senior Curator

Oct. 1992



Transcription
Miscellaneous History
1992

[transcription]

Transcription of texts written on Eugenio Dittborn's III History of the Human Face Envelopes

Envelope No: 67 Right

**UNA PINTURA AEROPOSTAL DE DITTBOAN
AN AIRMAIL PAINTING BY DITTBOAN**

DESTINATARIO/ DESTINATION FRANQUEO/POSTAGE

Gary Dufour, Vancouver Art Gallery
750 Hornby Street, Vancouver
British Columbia V6Z 2H7, Canada

ITINERARIO I ITINERARY

1. E. Dittborn
Stgo., Chile, May 89.
2. Denise Robinson
Sydney Australia, June 89.
3. III Bienal de la Habana,

Eugenio Dittborn

The III History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989



La Habana, Cuba, Nov. 89

4. Denise Robinson
Sydney, Australia, March 90

5. E. Dittborn
Stgo., Chile May 90

6. E. Dittborn
Stgo. Chile, July 92

7.

8.

9.

10.

TITULO/TITLE

The 111 History of the Human Face (The Sydney Camino)

TECNICA/TECHNIQUE

Painting and Photosilkscreen on 3 Fragments on Non Woven Fabric

OBRA/WORK

No 67 (Right)

ANO/YEAR

1989

DIMENSIONES/ SIZE OF WORK

420 x 200 cms

TEXTO/TEXT

In order to realize this work I asked Margarita to paint with red fluorescent paint some of the faces she had drawn some time ago in that small notebook which I kept in my studio.

She used the human faces drawn in the notebook as a score. I would indicate to her which lace from the notebook I wanted her to work on. Each face was in a compartment I was indicating to her. (Airmail Paintings are compartmentalized because they are folded)

An Airmail Interview, S. Cubitt — E. Dittborn, Camino Way, Stgo., Chile, 1991

REMITENTE/SENDER

Eugenio Dittborn Santa Rita 968, Santiago 12, Chile

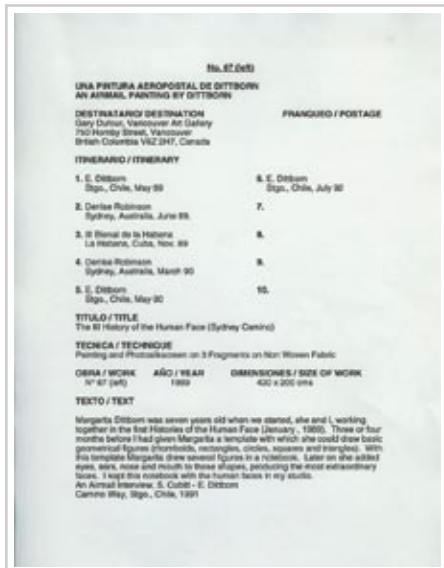
impresos punto color

la casa, the letter, the house

No. 67 (left)

**UNA PINTURA AEROPPOSTAL DE DITTORN
AN AIRMAIL PAINTING BY DITTORN**

DESTINATARIO/ DESTINATION FRANQUEO/POSTAGE



Eugenio Dittborn

The III History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989



Gary Dufour, Vancouver Art Gallery
750 Hornby Street, Vancouver
British Columbia V6Z 2H7, Canada

ITINERARIO /ITINERARY

1. E. Dittborn
Stgo., Chile, May 89.
2. Denise Robinson
Sydney Australia, June 89.
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Stgo. Chile, July 92
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

TITULO/TITLE

The III History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino)

TECNICA/TECHNIQUE

Painting and Photosilkscreen on 3 Fragments on Non Woven Fabric

OBRA/WORK

No 67 (left)

AÑO/YEAR

1989

DIMENSIONES/ SIZE OF WORK

420 x 200 cms

TEXTO/TEXT

Margarita Dittborn was seven years old when we started, she and I, working together in the first Histories of the Human Face (January, 1989). Three or four months before I had given Margarita a template with which she could draw basic geometrical figures (rhomboids, rectangles, circles, squares and triangles). With this template Margarita drew several figures in a notebook. Later on she added eyes, ears, nose and mouth to those shapes, producing the most extraordinary faces I kept this notebook with the human faces in my studio.

An Airmail Interview, S. Cubitt — E. Dittborn
Camino Way, Stgo., Chile, 1991

Eugenio Dittborn

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989

REMITENTE/SENDER

Eugenio Dittborn Santa Rita 968, Santiago 12, Chile

impresos punto color

la casa, the letter, the house



Dittborn Fax

Correspondence

1992-07-10

[transcription]

SANTIAGO DE CHILE, JULY THE 10th, 1992.

FROM EUGENIO DITTBORN TO GARY DUFOUR.

DEAR GARY DUFOUR:

1. THE TWO AIRMAIL PAINTINGS LEFT SANTIAGO TO THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY. LYON CARGO-THE COURIER THAT IS TRANSPORTING THEM-TOLD ME THAT THEY WERE GOING TO BE AT THE GALLERY ON MONDAY THE 13th OF JULY, 92. IT WOULD BE GOOD IF YOU USE THE SAME LYON CARGO TO SEND THEM BACK TO ME.

2. YOU SHOULDN'T BE DAUNTED, AS YOU SAY, BY THE COST OF 1.480 AMERICAN DOLLARS. THE PACKING AND TRANSPORT OF TWO PAINTINGS OF 420 X 210 CENTIMETERS ONE AND 280 X 210 CENTIMETERS THE OTHER, BETWEEN SANTIAGO AND VANCOUVER AND THEN VANCOUVER AND SANTIAGO (ABOUT 26,000 KILOMETERS), IS THE CHEAPEST ART TRANSPORT IN THE WORLD.

AIR MAIL PAINTINGS INC. IS THE CHEAPEST ART TRANSPORT IN THE WORLD. THEREFORE YOU SHOULD BE DAUNTED BUT IN THE OTHER DIRECTION. I WOULD LIKE VERY MUCH TO TALK MORE ABOUT THAT POINT (TRANSPORT-\$-PACKING-\$). I THINK THAT ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT TRANSFORMATIONS PROPOSED BY THE AIR MAIL PAINTINGS IS PRECISELY THE ECONOMIC RELATION PRODUCED BETWEEN THE INSTITUTION THAT EXHIBIT THEM AND MYSELF.

3. YOU HAVE TO KNOW, AS WELL, THAT THE PRICE OF THE ENVELOPES DEPEND ON THE AMOUNT OF ENVELOPES. 45 ENVELOPES, FOR INSTANCE, IS CHEAPER THAN TEN. I MEAN THAT THE PRICE PER UNIT IS CHEAPER.

4. SO, THE INITIAL PHASE OF YOUR RESEARCH WILL BE OVER VERY SOON. SOME POINTS IN RELATION WITH THE UNFOLDING OF THE 2 AIR MAIL PAINTINGS: — EACH THIRD OF THE TRIPTYCH IS CONTAINED IN ONE ENVELOPE. THE LEFT FRAGMENT IS CONTAINED IN THE LEFT ENVELOPE. THE CENTRE FRAGMENT IN THE CENTRE ENVELOPE AND THE RIGHT FRAGMENT INTO THE RIGHT ENVELOPE. THE SAME FOR THE DIPTYCH. THIS SEEMS OBVIOUS BUT IT IS NOT; IF ONE DOESN'T KNOW WHICH IS THE ORDER OF DISPOSITION OF THE FRAGMENTS ONE MIGHT ARRANGE THEM IN THE WRONG WAY. THAT'S CLEAR IN THE SECTION OF THE ENVELOPES WHERE IT'S WRITTEN "OBRA/WORK No."

5. IF THE WORKS ARE GOING TO BE HANGED IN THE WALL THE WALL OR WALLS SHOULD BE DARKER THAN THE PAINTINGS. I ALWAYS USE WHAT I

Eugenio Dittborn

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989

HAVE CALLED AIR MAIL PAINTING GREY: 60% WHITE PLUS 40% BLACK. THIS COLOUR BEHIND THE AIR MAIL PAINTINGS PRODUCES ON THE SURFACES OF THE NON WOVEN FABRIC-THAT IS THEIR SUPPORT-WHAT I CALL THE MELTING-SNOW-EFFECT, THAT IS THE ACTIVE IRREGULARITY OF THE NON WOVEN INSTEAD OF THE ABSTRACT FLATNESS OF NON SUBSTANTIAL WHITE. (REREAD THE BEAUTIFUL FRAGMENT ABOUT THE NON WOVEN FABRIC WRITTEN ON PAGE 6 OF CAMINO WAY BY BUY BRETT. (CENTRE OF THAT PAGE).

IF THE WALLS ARE WHITE, THE MELTING-SNOW-EFFECT FADES. SO IF THE WALLS OF THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY ARE WHITE, THE PAINTINGS SHOULD BE SEEN LYING ON THE FLOOR, CAREFULLY LYING ON THE FLOOR. BUT ON THE GROUND THEY WILL LOSE THEIR ENIGMA, THEIR VIRTUALITY AND THEIR FRAGILITY AND THAT IS NOT GOOD. IF YOU HANG THEM ON THE WALL DON'T STRETCH THEM HORIZONTALLY: THEY WOULD LOSE THEIR BELOVED FOLDS. AND THE FOLDS ARE SO BELOVED BECAUSE THEY ARE PROPERLY THE INTERSECTION OF THE AIRMAILNESS AND PAINTERNESS OF THE AIR MAIL PAINTINGS.

6. YES. THIS IS REAL RESEARCH: THE ONE ABOUT AN OBJECT THAT IS WORKING AND ALIVE (WHILE I WRITE THIS FAX TO YOU AT MIDNIGHT THE TWO AIRMAIL PAINTINGS ARE FLYING TO CANADA AND I AM PREPARING WITH YOU THEIR ARRIVAL.)

THEREFORE RESEARCH ABOUT WHAT AIR MAIL PAINTINGS DO AND NOT ABOUT WHAT AIR MAIL PAINTINGS ARE.

WHEN YOU RECEIVE THE WORKS PLEASE SEND TO ME A FAX SAYING ARRIVED OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. WELL, DEAR SENIOR CURATOR AND RESEARCHER, KIND REGARDS FROM DITTBORN AND I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT MY COOPERATION IS ENTHUSIASTIC BECAUSE YOUR ENTHUSIASM IS VERY COOPERATIVE.
CHAO, THEN!!



Dufour Fax
Correspondence
1992-07-13

[transcription]

July 13, 1992

Eugenio Dittborn
Santa Rita
968 Santiago 12
Chile

Dear Eugenio,

The *Airmail Paintings* travelled safely over the weekend and they are now in Vancouver. They are clearing customs now with Milne and Craighead and will be delivered to the gallery this afternoon. I am very keen to open them but I will wait to convene my colleagues to involve them in the act of receiving the *Airmail Paintings*.

Your point about what *Airmail Paintings* DO rather than what they objectively ARE is crucial. I will lay the paintings out on a dark grey carpet and then they can be viewed from the mezzanine above. The mezzanine is about 18 feet up so we should be able to see them to very good advantage with the "melting snow" effect.

Eugenio Dittborn

The Ill History of the Human Face (Sydney Camino), 1989

Thank you,

Sincerely,

[signed Gary Dufour]

Gary Dufour
Senior Curator

:am

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