

REMOTA: AIRMAIL PAINTINGS

BY EUGENIO DITTBORN

FEBRUARY 12 - APRIL 13, 1997

Eugenio Dittborn • Airmail Paintings and Envelopes



TheNewMuseum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

583 Broadway NYC 10012

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In the market of identities, we Chileans don't have big moustaches, or crafts that are overly pre-Columbian, or primordial music, or Mexican muralists, or even spicy foods.

The Allende government and the military dictatorship was, and continues to be, in Europe and the U.S., our pre-Columbian crafts, our primordial music, our Mexican murals. The Allende government and the military dictatorship permitted us to be known and recognized from the greatest possible distance, as long as we continued to wear it like a brand-name on a T-shirt. —Eugenio Dittborn¹

When Eugenio Dittborn sent his first art work through the Chilean airmail to an exhibition abroad thirteen years ago, his act was a direct challenge to some of the art world's most established traditions. As he put it later, it was as if "someone on a tiny island had put a message in a bottle and thrown it out to sea." But when the same work returned a few months later via airmail to the artist's studio in Santiago, he recalls that his feelings combined elation with resignation: "It felt as if I had proven both that the world existed, and that the confinement of Chile was a reality."

As is the case with a number of other conceptually-based artists working in South America as well as in other parts of the world, one of the first principles behind Dittborn's work is an understanding that the concealment of art's mechanisms in the visual structure of the exhibition provides parallels to other systematic erasures that occur on a regular basis throughout various strata of society. In his work certain of these hidden processes become self-evident while also drawing our attention to his iconography in a way that encourages us to see the connections between the two. Dittborn's concern with what we might call the "metaphysics of place" calls to mind the work of Uruguayan modernist Joaquín Torres-García, who in the 1920s depicted the world map with the south pole at the top as a way of questioning cultural values. In the 1990s, Brazilian artist Jac Leirner creates travel-based works that focus on the airline blankets, ashtrays, and/or ticket stubs that are an inevitable by-product of the artist's work process.

Dittborn's art questions contemporary myths of connectivity from the perspective of one who has had ample occasion to ponder the effects of geographical and cultural distance. His native Chile's physical boundaries and political history together have enforced periodic

bouts of isolation and confinement upon its populace. Born in 1943, much of Dittborn's current artistic direction stems from his participation in a movement known as *la Escena de Avanzada*, which was formed in Santiago in 1976 to explore ways of working under the military dictatorship that had begun three years earlier with the violent overthrow of the civilian government. Focusing on the interaction between poetry, fiction, body art, graphics, experimental video, and criticism, *la Escena de Avanzada* drew attention to itself through public actions, writings, and one-day exhibitions that sought to claim space for creative activity within the bounds of the heavily restrictive Pinochet regime, at the same time that they tried to establish links to the outside world in the midst of an international cultural boycott.

Dittborn approaches the subject matter of his work in the spirit of an archivist by accumulating historical engravings, commercial and educational illustrations, police photos and "identikit" files, ethnographic records, faces drawn by children and psychiatric patients, images torn from newspapers, and an even broader range of textual sources. He then paints, prints, stamps, and sews his imagery and texts in rows and patterns, thereby inviting the viewer into the complex process of ordering and identifying the material, as well as forming associations which may be more idiosyncratic or personal.

In the earliest work on view, *The Corpse, The Treasure* (1991), Dittborn brings together contrasting references to mortality.



Eugenio Dittborn • *The Corpse, The Treasure*, Airmail Painting No 90, 1991

A press photo of the cadaver of a “disappeared” citizen found seventeen years after his death is juxtaposed with a personal photo of the artist’s daughter ten minutes after her birth, which is in turn inset with a drawing of the mummy of an Incan boy who had laid in the desert for centuries. The transcript of a woman’s remembered ordeal during a recent earthquake (published in a newspaper) seems to augment the fragility implied by a nearby schoolbook illustration of a rustic wooden home.

As with many of his works of the past five years, *The City in Flames* (1993) is rooted in the idea of travel and mobility, especially the movements of individuals and their images through time and space. The juxtaposition of the photographed faces of indigenous Chileans with those of male and female criminals of the 1950s provokes the viewer’s sense of displaced justice, in the same way that the resemblance between children’s expressive drawings of faces and those produced by schizophrenics pointedly suggests associations between childhood and mental illness. *To Return* (1993) more directly addresses the problems of colonization. It centers on the enigmatic figure of Jemmy Button, a Tierra del Fuego Indian who was picked up in the mid-1800s by Charles Darwin during the first voyage of the *Beagle* and taken to England, where he lived for several years, speaking English, wearing suits, and making appearances at court. Button’s return to his native land years later as a stranger was made worse by witnessing his people’s decimation by disease—an early case study of the perils of travel, as well as a metaphor for Chile’s estranged relationship to European culture and ideas.

In *La Cuisine et la Guerre* (*Cooking and War*) (1994), the largest work on view, Dittborn brings an even more irreconcilable sense of cultural conflict to the fore. Beginning with historical accounts of atrocities committed by the Spanish in the New World, the painting incorporates multiple perspectives. Fray Bartolomeo de las Casas, who was the first to expose these atrocities to the crown, is included as a central figure, but so is an engraved scene of Mapuche warriors roasting a conquistador on an open fire, and numerous quotes from both European and indigenous sources exploring the contrast between cultural beliefs about death. Although it begins, like much of Dittborn’s art, from sociopolitical premises, *La Cuisine et la Guerre* resolves its conflicts of meaning through the exposure of deeper cultural beliefs, along with the shared knowledge that while such beliefs act to bind groups of people together, they also function to keep other groups completely apart. The underlying message seems to be that in today’s interwoven global village, a continuing sensitivity towards historical and present-day cultural differences is the only effective antidote to a streamlined, monocultural world.



Eugenio Dittborn • *La cocina y la guerra*, detail, 1994

Despite its innovative method of production and dissemination, Dittborn’s work should not be mistaken for “mail art” in the limited sense that recent art history has defined the practice. On the contrary, it is presented to the viewer within the traditional mode of paintings, except that in place of wooden stretchers or metal frames for support, he uses simple grommets and L-hooks that permit the work to be suspended almost directly on the wall. The paintings consist of multiple panels, all the same size, hung to create an appearance of seamless continuity. Each panel arrives in its own envelope, which is inscribed with that painting’s previous destinations, as well as an accompanying critical text. The envelopes are hung from a metal ring adjacent to the painting, so that the viewer can peruse the work’s history (much like the museum registrar’s work of documenting a work’s provenance).

Produced in order to traverse national boundaries, Dittborn’s Airmail Paintings remind us of the increased globalization of the art community, and the fact that artists today establish their reputations in large degree by exhibiting in the proliferating number of international group shows organized in seemingly every corner of the world. The artists who participate in these exhibitions frequently live like nomads, while their works undergo traumatic rituals of packing, transport, handling, and customs—all traces of which have been carefully erased from sight in time for the viewing public’s arrival. By bringing these and parallel acts of erasure into the harsh light of the museum, Dittborn’s art demonstrates that even simple acts of communication across cultures require a maximum amount of care on both sides, and that the price the voyager pays for being misunderstood may be greater than that of never having ventured out to see the world.

Dan Cameron, Senior Curator

¹ Eugenio Dittborn, “Bye Bye Love, Entrevista con Eugenio Dittborn,” *Revista de Crítica Cultural* 13 (November 1996): 48.

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Collapsed Distances | Transformed Space

Thursday, February 13, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

\$5 general, \$3 students & seniors, free for Advocate-level members and above

Drawing upon cinema, literature, and the visual arts, panelists discuss how complex processes of globalization destabilize concepts of nation, state, and identity, with: **Caren Kaplan**, author of *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*; **Hamid Naficy**, author of *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged*; and **Brian Goldfarb**, Curator of Education, The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

One Step Beyond the Fantastic

Thursday, March 6, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

\$5 general, \$3 students & seniors, free for Advocate-level members and above

Critics, artists, and curators featured in the anthology *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* discuss shifts in Latin American artistic discourses and their manifestations in North American critical and visual culture, with **Luis Camnitzer**, artist and critic; **George Yúdice**, writer and Instructor, Hunter College, CUNY; **Tomás Ybarra-Frausto**, writer and Associate Director for Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation; and **Gerardo Mosquera**, Curator, The New Museum of Contemporary Art. This event is co-sponsored by The MIT Press.

ARTIST TALK

A Conversation with Eugenio Dittborn

Saturday, February 15, 4:00 p.m.

\$4 general, \$3 students & seniors, free for Advocate-level members and above

FILM AND VIDEO

The Roving Eye is a series of film and video screenings at The New Museum featuring the work of several artists who explore issues of travel and transience. \$4 suggested admission.

Eugenio Dittborn

Thursday, February 27, 6:30 p.m.

This screening presents video work by Eugenio Dittborn.

The Excessive Tourist

Thursday, March 13, 6:30 p.m.

The impulse to travel and record the experience is explored by artists in this program: Sophie Calle and Gregory Shepard, Bob Kaputov, and Éder Santos.

A Sense of Home

Thursday, March 20, 6:30 p.m.

Immigration and diasporadic distances are examined in this program of videos by Juan Downey, Tony Labat, and Alex Rivera.

Recalling the Ephemeral

Thursday, April 3, 6:30 p.m.

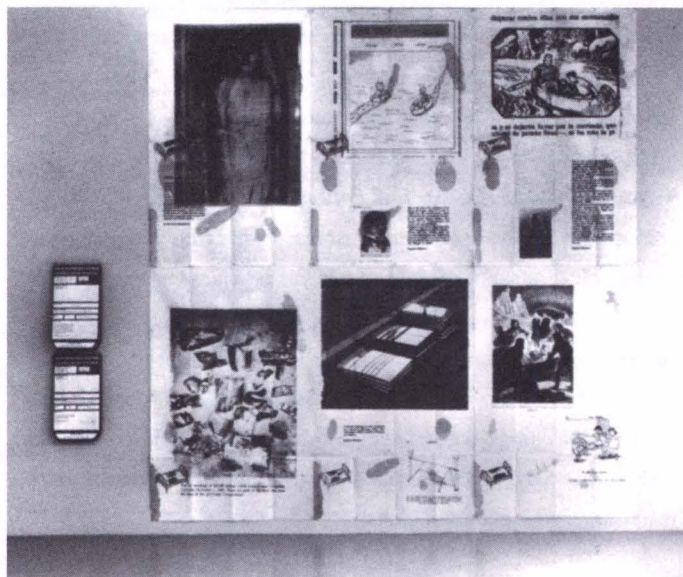
Efforts to transpose performance and other forms of ephemera to film and video are considered by artists in this program: Phyllis Baldino, Claudio Caldini, and Gordon Matta-Clark. Co-sponsored by Latin American Video Archives (LAVA).

EXHIBITION PUBLICATION

The fully illustrated, bilingual (English/Spanish) catalogue includes interviews and essays by New Museum Senior Curator Dan Cameron and Curator Gerardo Mosquera; critics and writers Roberto Merino, Sean Cubitt, Guy Brett, and Adriana Valdes; and artist Eugenio Dittborn. Published by Pública Editorial in collaboration with The New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile, the book's proportions are based on the size of a single panel of an Airmail Painting, 14 ¾ x 10".

The exhibition has been organized by Senior Curator Dan Cameron.

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Eugenio Dittborn • *To Return (RTM)*, Airmail Painting No 103, 1993

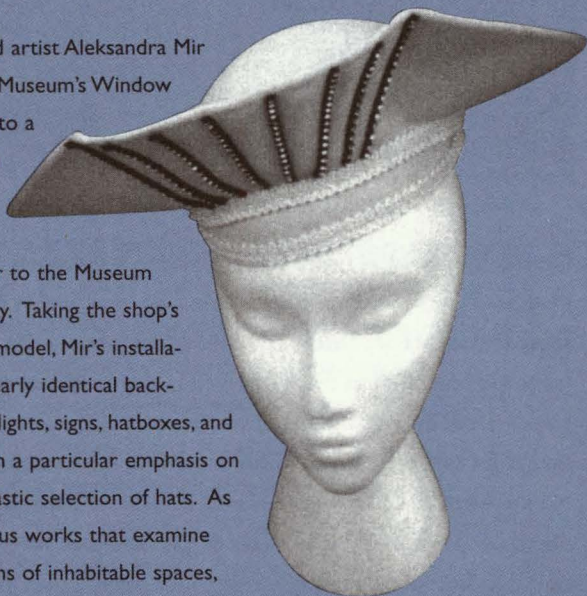
WINDOW ON BROADWAY

FASHION HATS

BY ALEKSANDRA MIR

FEBRUARY 12 - APRIL 4, 1997

New York-based artist Aleksandra Mir transforms the Museum's Window on Broadway into a visual extension of Fashion Hats Inc., the store next door to the Museum at 581 Broadway. Taking the shop's aesthetics as a model, Mir's installation includes nearly identical backdrops, hangers, lights, signs, hatboxes, and accessories with a particular emphasis on the store's fantastic selection of hats. As with her previous works that examine social dimensions of inhabitable spaces, Mir's project incorporates alternative notions of "display" while calling attention to the interchange between art and commerce on the busiest retail block in SoHo.



Dan Cameron, Senior Curator

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Hours

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday: 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.;
Saturday: 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m., free.
Monday and Tuesday: closed.

Admission

\$4.00 general; \$3.00 artists, students, seniors; Members and children under 12, free.

Directions

Subway: Lexington Ave. line (#6) to Spring St. or Bleecker St.; Broadway line (N/R) to Prince St.; 8th Ave. line (A/C/E) to Spring St.; 6th Ave. line (B/D/Q/F) to Broadway/Lafayette. Bus: #1/5/6/21 to Houston St. or Broadway.

Group Visits

Guided group visits are available for adults and students grades 7 through 12 by calling the Education department at 212.219.1222.

Membership

To join and receive information on special events and programs, please call the Membership office at 212.219.1222.