

AIRMAIL PAINTINGS: A PRESENTATION

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Curatorial text. Patrick Hamilton

I owe my work to the acquisition of superannuated magazines, outmoded profane relics into whose photographs drifted the lapses of public life, breaches through which the unfinished present leaks.

Eugenio Dittborn (*Caja de herramientas*)

The creases in the paper, folded to fit inside the envelope that materialises its condition as postal correspondence, are this painting's production marks: its way of manifesting itself through the act of dismantling geometry (in the painting) by tracing on paper the metaphor for a new procedure for conjoining surfaces.

Nelly Richard (*Dobleces y plegaduras*)

I begin this text somewhat apprehensively, as writing about the work of Eugenio Dittborn in general, and his airmail paintings in particular, presents a series of challenges I should like to address from the outset. First, there is no denying that much has already been written about Dittborn's work; it is "sufficiently encircled by texts", as Gonzalo Muñoz puts it. These writings include insightful essays of peerless conceptual rigour, power and depth by the likes of Adriana Valdés, Nelly Richard, Pablo Oyarzún, Ronald Kay, Gonzalo Muñoz and Dan Cameron, as well as the text by British art critic Guy Brett reprinted in this catalogue.¹ Second, Dittborn himself has constructed an entire apparatus of writing around his work which, in the words of Bruno Cuneo, constitutes "inventive, metamorphic writing that never unfolds under the imperative of translation or conceptual clarification but rather under the impetus of poetic resonance, correspondences and metaphors".² Dittborn's writing, as in *Correcaminos* [Roadrunner], also included in this catalogue, is precise in its selection of words and images and, like his visual work, creates collisions between them that produce highly resonant poetic effects. His writing is clearly influenced by the Chilean poetic tradition, particularly Nicanor Parra, and his visual work is indebted to the experimental visual poetry project *Quebrantahuesos* [Bonebreakers], carried out by Parra in collaboration with Enrique Lihn and Alejandro Jodorowsky.³ Lastly, I readily

¹ Key texts on Eugenio Dittborn's work include *Del espacio de acá* (1980), by Ronald Kay; *Dobleces y plegaduras* (1985) and *Nosotros/los otros* (1992), by Nelly Richard; *La pintura que aquí cuelga* (1993), by Gonzalo Muñoz; *Escala en Santiago (efectos de extrañamiento)* (1998), by Adriana Valdés; *Protocollage de lectura* (1985) and *La ciudad en llamas* (2003), by Pablo Oyarzún; and *Memoria de la pantalla* (1997), by Dan Cameron.

² Bruno Cuneo, in the prologue to Eugenio Dittborn's book *Escrita*, published in Santiago de Chile by Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2021.

³ *Quebrantahuesos*, from 1952, was a series of poetic interventions that appeared in various public places in downtown Santiago in the style of a mural diary made out of newspaper cuttings, combining texts and images in surrealist fashion. In addition to Nicanor Parra, the poet Enrique Lihn and Alejandro Jodorowsky also collaborated.

acknowledge my own limitations as a visual artist venturing into the practice of writing, even though I have closely followed Dittborn's trajectory and the lessons offered by his work.

I

I met Eugenio Dittborn in person at Las Lanzas bar in Plaza Ñuñoa, Santiago de Chile, in 1997. I had already encountered his artistic work, his videos, his artist books and texts about his practice at the Escuela de Bellas Artes, where I enrolled in 1994. Art school was also where I discovered most of the other authors I just mentioned, particularly Ronald Kay, since his book *Del espacio de acá* [On the Space Here] is key to understanding the *visual thinking* that underpins Dittborn's work. At the time, Dittborn was something of a legend within the local art scene. Although his work had won international acclaim, in the mid-1990s the only way you could see an airmail painting in Chile was by visiting the artist's own studio. The first airmail paintings I saw were at a single-day exhibition entitled "Bye Bye Love" at Jaime O'Ryan's photography studio in Santiago in 1996. News spread by word of mouth among art teachers and students, and we flocked to the show en masse. A giant cardboard invitation—there was no internet or social media—was printed in large fluorescent-orange letters with a black heading and illustration. Upon arrival, a conversation between the artist and theorist Carlos Pérez Villalobos provided a suitably solemn intellectual framework.

Putting on an exhibition for a mere twelve hours somewhere other than a traditional art venue, such as a museum or gallery, was quite a statement in itself. This gesture alone—shifting art to the periphery and only making it available for a limited time—forced us, as viewers, to go and see his work as we might make the effort to meet an out-of-town relative who happened to be making a brief stopover in our city. The two airmail paintings were in transit and had to be seen without delay. One of them, *El cadáver, el tesoro*, was travelling from New Zealand to the Centre Pompidou, Paris, while the other, *La ciudad en llamas*, was en route from Amsterdam to the New Museum, New York. Both are key paintings in Dittborn's oeuvre. *El cadáver, el tesoro* juxtaposes an image of the body of a detainee who disappeared during Pinochet's dictatorship with a photograph of the artist's newborn daughter, Margarita. These two images—one public, one private—reflect emergence: the exhumation of a body out of the ground and the birth of a child into the world. The photograph of the exhumed body, taken from the front page of a national newspaper, serves as an act of memory and resistance, as well as a metaphor for a return, concepts central to Dittborn's engagement with found imagery—what some theorists of his work have called "printed matter".

I recall the walls of the makeshift exhibition space painted grey and the two enormous paintings, together with their envelopes, illuminated with special spotlights that silhouetted them against the background. I was immediately struck by their format and large scale, as well as their resemblance to graphic work rather than painting. These works lacked stretchers and were hung from small eyelets to form irregular compositions on the wall. Airmail paintings contain, so to speak, the minimum amount of paint required to be considered paintings. A few diluted stains tint the support (synthetic interfacing in this case), intermingling and overlaying with images, texts, embroidery, illustrations and silkscreen prints. In *La ciudad en llamas*, circular blotches of paint and a grid of crosses reference two essential painters for Dittborn: Roy Lichtenstein and Kazimir Malevich, respectively. A typical nod, given that Dittborn's works abound in references to the history of painting, particularly to the stain as a fundamental concept for reflecting on his practice. As the artist says: "Airmail paintings are pictorial subtraction; they are subtracted from easel painting and removed to be set by mail, manoeuvring with a minimal paint. Almost nothing.

Only what is strictly necessary to move through the postal system, come out on the other side and be exhibited there as an unfolding of various scanty resources.”⁴

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Airmail paintings are a hybrid between letters and paintings. They have both an epistolary and a pictorial body. Eugenio Dittborn invented this format in Santiago de Chile in 1983, after more than a decade of experimenting with various supports and extrapictorial techniques aimed at challenging traditional easel painting. At the time, he was using materials such as grey cardboard, methacrylate, cotton, flour sacks, MDF boards and even the Atacama Desert as his canvas. In 1981 Dittborn poured 350 litres of burnt motor oil onto the desert floor in a performance titled *Cambio de aceite, un trabajo de pintura*. Film of the action shows the artist spilling and spreading oil across the desert, referencing Jackson Pollock’s dripping technique while parodying academic painting and the use of oil paint as a noble, hegemonic pigment. This artistic action pushed the boundaries of painting into natural spaces, where the desert floor replaced the canvas, and the artist’s body and hands stood in for the brush, all the while expanding the conceptual limits of painting.

Airmail paintings were designed to be folded, placed in an envelope and sent as international airmail. In this way, they travel across the world from one place to another, constantly coming and going, always shifting between origin and destination. Every exhibition space becomes a waypoint. The envelopes, displayed alongside the paintings, function as catalogues or logs containing the recipient’s name, postage stamps, title, technique, a descriptive or poetic text and the painting’s itinerary.

Letters en route and paintings once they arrive, airmail paintings bear the marks of their journey on their surface. Here, the folds play a central role as facilitators of the artwork’s airmail-based nature, thus enabling Dittborn to make contact with the international art world during Pinochet’s dictatorship. The paintings flew in and out of Chile as letters, deftly evading the regime’s strict censorship of cultural products. As Dittborn explained to Sean Cubitt, the political element to his work lies in the folds: “The airmail-based nature of my paintings as a strategy, material option and artistic cunning: to pass off a painting as a letter, to reach any point on the planet without fail, to overcome isolation, separation and international confinement. All this is possible through and from the folds. The journey, then, is the politics of my paintings, and the folds, the unfolding of these politics.”⁵ I see this as central to Dittborn’s poetics. This strategic displacement of the political element to his work towards the folds, towards the *production marks*, as Nelly Richard puts it—rather than emphasising the easily recognisable and codifiable images of the forgotten and the marginalised—was always a deliberate manoeuvre to avoid reductive interpretations and to outwit metropolitan expectations about Latin American art.

Once they reach their destination, airmail paintings are opened, unfolded, laid on the floor and hung across large walls, once again echoing Jackson Pollock’s performative gestures and symbolising ideas of exhumation and emergence. As already mentioned, these tend to be large-format works, like the three airmail paintings that make up the show at Es Baluard Museu in Palma. Within each painting, between the boxlike folds, Dittborn incorporates a varying number of elements and images with a wide range of origins: police records, photos from old sporting

⁴ Eugenio Dittborn, “Correcaminos VII”. In *Pinturas aeropostales de Eugenio Dittborn*. Santiago de Chile: Francisco Zegers Editor, 1985.

⁵ Eugenio Dittborn in conversation with Sean Cubitt, included in the catalogue for the “Remota” [Remote] exhibition (1997) of airmail paintings at the New Museum, New York, and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago de Chile.

magazines, press cuttings, drawings by psychiatric patients and children, comic strips, personal photos and poetic texts. The result is sort of a counter-narrative that diverges from official history to challenge the centralist accounts of Eurocentric modernity; it can doubtless be read as a precursor to the decolonial practices prevalent on today's cultural scene.

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All this is exemplified in the three airmail paintings in this exhibition. *La XXVII Historia del Rostro (Lejía)*, from 2004, shows faces that are the social and symbolic reverse of what is supposedly worthy of being portrayed, which would usually be monarchs, aristocrats, bourgeois individuals, important figures of all kinds or successful and famous names from popular culture, as Guy Brett examines in his text by comparing Dittborn's work with Warhol's silkscreen prints. Seemingly floating in the immensity of the 2 × 22 m surface of the painting, these precarious faces are exhibited as "graphic flotsam from a shipwreck".⁶ Mugshots of criminals, told sketches of other delinquents, faces drawn by children and psychiatric patients: these are all portraits that fall outside the canon.

To Return, an airmail painting from 1993, contains other recurring elements in Dittborn's work. First, the notion of travel, leaving, returning and the risks associated with this transit. In addition to the journey undertaken by the painting itself, there is a set of images that speak to displacements, accidents and death. As well as to returns and appearances, as already discussed. The images are sourced from various places: journalistic and documentary photos, scientific illustrations, comic strips, literary texts and a photograph of an African mask, which introduces biographical elements. These items from highly disparate places "meet" seemingly by accident on the painting's surface. Here we find Jemmy Button, the Fuegian indigenous man who was exchanged for buttons by an English captain and taken to London as a specimen, only to return to Tierra del Fuego and die of pneumonia; the image of sailor John Torrington, whose frozen body was found after 138 years in the Arctic; the cartoon of a castaway contemplating the image of his own death with surprise and fear; the remains of a plane crash in Colorado; and a posthumous gift from the artist's sister, who had brought him a souvenir from Africa before falling ill and dying of malaria.

Finally, the airmail painting *Casa-House* (1993–2014) is made on wrapping paper. This was the first material Dittborn used for his airmail paintings: a lightweight, durable surface that folds without tearing. On its surface is a pattern of dripped acrylic in red and green tones, and on top, a large schematic drawing of a house. In airmail paintings, a house functions as a symbol of what is missing. It alludes, therefore, to the errant and permanently exiled condition of the paintings.

I should like to conclude by stressing that "Eugenio Dittborn: Airmail Paintings" is the first solo show in Spain by one of the fundamental figures of Latin American conceptual art from the 1970s and 1980s. Eugenio Dittborn's work and visual thinking has had a tremendous influence on several generations of artists across the continent. He is also a fundamental artist for the many Chilean artists who have had the fortune of following his career closely and receiving his guidance over the years. Sharply relevant to contemporary aesthetic debates, his artistic practice projects a profound reflection on the limits of painting, its materiality, its circulation and the ways of understanding the relationships between the local and the global, the centre and the periphery, while simultaneously questioning canonical discourses on identity, origin and history.

⁶ Carlos Pérez Villalobos. "La dieta del náufrago" [The Castaway's Diet]. In *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria* [Politics and Aesthetics of Memory]. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000.

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