

BACK AND FORTH:  
EUGENIO DITTBORN'S AIRMAIL PAINTINGS AND THE MEDIATION OF MEANING

By

CLAUDIA ANDREA GRANT

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To my husband, Nye, my daughter, Olivia, and my unborn son.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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Claudia Andrea Grant

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The work of Chilean contemporary artist Eugenio Dittborn has often been interpreted through a political lens. This thesis argues that while there are indeed political implications to Dittborn's art, his artistic contribution goes significantly beyond these political views. The focus is on the dimensions of Dittborn's artistic practice that have often been overlooked in favor of political analysis. The technique and method of dissemination constitute the most important aspects of Dittborn's art. His best known work, the *Airmail Paintings*, would not have the significance they have in contemporary art if the materials and distribution method were different. With the aid of Rosalind Krauss's important text, *A Voyage to the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, I show the various ways in which the meaning of Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* is dependent on more than mere subject matter.

This study is organized into 8 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. Chapters 2 to 4 include a visual analysis of the *Airmail Paintings* and an overview of the political situation in which they were created. Chapters 5 to 7 explain the importance of the medium, the technique used by the artist, and its possibilities for interpretations.

Dittborn's work has long been interpreted and analyzed from a political perspective. With this study, I hope to address not only new alternatives for further visual analysis and interpretations of meaning, but also the social factors involved in the process of creating conceptual art.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of writing about Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* developed during the years of my undergraduate education. My area of interest and education has always been Contemporary Latin American art. Although a great deal has been written about Latin American artists, there is a noticeable lack of scholarship and education about South American artists. During undergraduate lectures about Latin American art at the University of Central Florida in Orlando and graduate lectures at the University of Florida in Gainesville, I analyzed many artists' work. Their sources of inspiration, influences, and artistic preferences were always traced to major artistic currents that had developed in Europe or the United States. Much of the information provided by these lectures was interesting and crucial to my understanding of Latin American art, but only on rare occasions did I see examples of artists from South America. This situation concerned me, so I decided to do my own research.

The first step was to find an artist who would encapsulate several issues at the same time. South America has an extensive and dramatic history of social revolt, which resulted in a diverse range of artistic expressions. The artist of my choice would need to have an artistic production that included social, political, and conceptual ideas. With the guidance of the chair of my committee, I chose Dittborn's work for my study, because he is one of the South American artists who has created a new artistic tendency—combined with social meaning—that has been developed through conceptual ideas.

Dittborn is a Chilean-born artist who developed an artistic career before and during Augusto Pinochet's Chilean dictatorship (1973 – 1990). His career did not end with the dictatorship. On the contrary, Dittborn is still producing works of art along the same lines of social interests developed through conceptual ideas. For the purposes of this thesis, the areas of

focus is precisely his most acclaimed—and at the same time most criticized—works of art: the *Airmail Paintings*. Although Dittborn did not exhibit them during the dictatorship, he silently produced them during that period. My research therefore starts with background information about the Chilean political and social situation during the 1970s and 1980s.

An extensive amount of literature has accumulated about pre-dictatorship, dictatorship, and post-dictatorship issues. Some of the authors used for this research focus on social issues and politics, while others concentrate more on the artistic development. Nelly Richard, a French-born Chilean resident, sociologist and critic, whose focus of investigation is the artistic and social implications of the dictatorial government, is one of my most important sources. Although Richard touches on artistic analysis, she focuses mostly on social issues. Her strongest argument is related to the clashes produced between the fascist regime and the intellectual world in an era when intellectualism was fed by a pre-dictatorship government inspired by Marxism. She also analyzes the use of cultural power and social control to shape the Chilean artistic world according to government standards. Her analysis illuminates the consequences of censorship in the Chilean past and present.

Another crucial issue Richard focuses on is memory. How do we deal with the phenomenon of memory without bringing memory to life through art? Since many Chilean artists of the 1970s and 1980s used political imagery, Richard's interest in memory becomes one of the main components of a post-dictatorial society and the art produced by it. She uses Dittborn's work as one of the examples to make her point. One of her most significant areas of discussion is the issue of Latin American identity. This section was of a particular interest because it deals with the misconceptions associated with Latin American society, and therefore with Latin American art. Part of the problem associated with these misconceptions stems from

how little work is done at U.S. universities on the work of Latin American artists. Although many academic institutions provide courses and degrees in Latin American art, the focus on South American artists is limited. Richard summarizes all these issues in her 2004 book *The Insubordination of Signs*.<sup>1</sup> Using clear language and a simple succession of events, Richard comprehensively covers the social and artistic developments in Chile during the dictatorship. The book also focuses on the influences and consequences of an oppressive government.

Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic's writings are a crucial complement to Richard's social point of view. Gaspar Galaz, a Chilean art critic, and Milan Ivelic, a professor of aesthetics at the Instituto de Arte Contemporaneo and also director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, are two of the most important experts on Chilean visual arts during this period. They are co-authors of several books and essays which attempt to develop a Chilean artistic timeline. Although they cover artistic tendencies from other Latin American countries, their main focus is Chile. In *Apuntes Para Una Reflexion: Artes Visuales in Chile*,<sup>2</sup> they provide an in-depth analysis of how international artistic currents have influenced some Chilean artists, and how others have found inspiration through folk traditions. Without overlooking social meaning and its implications, their work provides a visual analysis of several artists. This visual analysis helps to situate many of these Chilean artists in an international timeline that determines whether or not they have been influenced by Europe and the United States. For the purpose of my research, the visual analysis and international influences are particularly relevant because they help to identify Dittborn's conceptual ideas. However, Galaz and Ivelic emphasize in many of their writings the artistic gap produced by the dictatorship, and they delve into social issues overlapping with Richard's area of

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<sup>1</sup> Nelly Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic, "Apuntes Para una Reflexion: Artes Visuales in Chile," *Aisthesis* 23 (1990).

research. When they refer to the artistic gap produced by the dictatorship, they mean an artistic gap in painting that opened some doors for other styles like installation, performance, and action art.<sup>3</sup> The literature pertinent to this artistic gap, as provided by Galaz and Ivelic, is crucial to the understanding of Dittborn's work. *Chile Arte Actual* is the most important piece of literature about Chilean art.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Galaz and Ivelic explore social, cultural, political, and artistic issues in contemporary Chile. This book is a comprehensive summary of all the artistic developments to keep in mind when analyzing Chilean art during the dictatorship.

Aesthetics professor Luis Cecerau of the Universidad de Chile and acclaimed art historian Shifra Goldman are two other important critics of Chilean artistic and social issues. Cecerau's essay *El Cine Chileno en los Laberintos del Subdesarrollo* provides a political analysis of the consequences of the dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> In this analysis, he emphasizes the capitalistic ideas instigated by the military regime, and how this economic model interfered with Chilean society and its artistic development. Goldman, on the other hand, does not analyze any specific artists as significant examples. He instead focuses on the artistic issues that mattered to those artists, and shows how the government influenced the artists' creative process by blocking artistic freedom.<sup>6</sup> His writings become a fundamental source of background information, crucial to the understanding of the complex socio-political artistic environment of Chile during these years.

Another important source of information is a book published by Dittborn, *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales*.<sup>7</sup> This book consists of a series of interviews between the artist

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<sup>3</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, "Apuntes Para una Reflexion: Artes Visuales in Chile," 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., *Chile Arte Actual* (Valparaiso, Chile: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaiso, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Luis Cecerau, "El Cine Chileno en los Laberintos del Subdesarrollo," *Aisthesis* 23 (1990), 30-33.

<sup>6</sup> Shifra Goldman, "Dissidence and Resistance: Art in Chile under the Dictatorship," in *Dimensions of the Americas*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 249-266.

<sup>7</sup> Eugenio Dittborn, *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales* (London: ICA, 1993).

and a diverse group of critics. These discussions became an essential element for my study because they clarified meaning, subject matter, and technique. The artist explains that several aspects of his production have been misunderstood, and by making these interviews available to the public he hopes to explain those issues. One of the most important issues he considers is the politically oriented content in his paintings. Because most critics have analyzed Dittborn's work from a political point of view, his art is usually seen as solely political. There is a tendency to ignore the technique that it is at the core of the project. Through *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales*, the artist provides important clues that lead us to think about other aspects of his work, not just the political implications. One of the most influential art critics included in *MAPA* is Guy Brett, critic and curator. In his essay, *Dust Clouds*, Brett introduces the concept of genre that becomes one of Dittborn's innovations during this period.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the many modernisms that will be discussed during my research. For my investigation, emphasizing the visual aspects of Dittborn's work becomes critical in understanding his paintings.

So far, Dittborn's political and artistic aspects have been studied. For the purpose of my study, international ideas about art must now be introduced. Craig Owens and Rosalind Krauss, American critics and theorists, are two important sources. Both analyze ideas that can be directly related to Dittborn's work. Their analysis of contemporary art provides the necessary tools to insert Dittborn's visual and social development into broader currents such as conceptual art.

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<sup>8</sup> Guy Brett, "Dust Clouds," in *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales* by Eugenio Dittborn (London: ICA, 1992), 47-65.

Owens's essay *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, is a key study.<sup>9</sup> He explores connections between allegory and conceptual art. Considering that allegory is an artistic type used since antiquity, finding the connections between allegory and conceptual art is a challenge. But Owens provides convincing arguments to clearly visualize such connections. Since Dittborn's work is charged with symbols and analogies, Owens's analysis is an important tool. With the help of Owens's examination, it becomes apparent that allegories are found embedded not only in the subject matter, but also in the technique used by Dittborn.

Krauss, on the other hand, explores the importance of the medium. She openly rejects conceptual ideas, such as installation art and image appropriation. In her book *A Voyage to the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, she criticizes such contemporary practices, considering them a failure.<sup>10</sup> Her study is relevant to an analysis of Dittborn's work because his art was also once rejected, although no one has provided a convincing argument to explain such rejection. Most critics of Dittborn's work trace this rejection back to its political meaning and the influences the government had in the artistic world. But since the core of my study is not Dittborn's politics, a new point of view must be introduced. Krauss's book provides general accounts that can be applied to American artists in a U.S. setting, as well as artists and artistic developments from Latin America. Krauss explores ideas, such as medium's relationship to the world and its importance, the need for artistic preservation and the role of the artist, and the problem of lack of criteria to judge art. These issues are key concepts to consider when thinking of conceptual art.

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<sup>9</sup> Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 315-328.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1999).

Only a few critics are used for this study. For the most part, each one of them provides a deep analysis in his respective area of study. The purpose of my research is to combine those ideas and to apply them to the works of Dittborn. As previously mentioned, he encapsulates the social, political and artistic issues associated with Chilean society and its development. Valeria de los Rios, member of the Chilean association at Cornell University, most closely reflects the analysis proposed by my thesis. In her essay *Marks of Travel: Strategies in Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings*, she examines Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* as a metaphor for maps and travel.<sup>11</sup> She uses these metaphors to touch upon many conceptual techniques that have been helpful during my research. However, no one has combined social issues with conceptual ideas applied to Dittborn. As mentioned earlier, the socio-political meaning of Dittborn's work cannot be ignored, but it cannot be the sole focus of attention either.

By analyzing works of art that have socio-political implications from an internationally artistic point of view such as conceptualism, I am integrating ideas that have long been set apart. Integration becomes important because it helps to reduce the distance between the United States or Europe and South America. As previously mentioned, this is an issue that has created many of the misconceptions associated with Latin American art. As a result, this study becomes a small step toward the integration of artists from South America into the bigger picture: Worldwide Conceptual Art. By connecting ideas, we are globalizing artistic tendencies, and, as a consequence, expanding our knowledge.

This essay will analyze Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* from a broader point of view than has previously been the case. Although the political meaning of his paintings will be considered and

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<sup>11</sup> Valeria De Los Rios, "Marks of Travel: Strategies in Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings," *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative* no. 14 (2006), [http://www.imageandnarrative.be/painting/Valeria\\_de%20los\\_Rios.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/painting/Valeria_de%20los_Rios.htm)

analyzed, I will concentrate on a much needed visual analysis from a conceptual standpoint. My thesis is that the core of Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* is not their political meaning, but rather the execution of technique. My research will focus on the artistic contributions to conceptualism. First, I will introduce the early signs of artistic change in Chile during the dictatorship, with a description of Dittborn's work and its contributions to the Chilean artistic milieu. Second, although the artist did not exhibit in Chile during the dictatorship, I will focus on the ways Dittborn represented a rebellion against the establishment, as well as on the consequences of this rebellion. Third, I will discuss the allegorical content in Dittborn's work. Finally, I will explain how the execution of his technique becomes solely conceptual and how the artist deals with the integration of its socio-political message.

## CHAPTER 2 EARLY SIGNS FOR AN ARTISTIC SHIFT

### **Airmail Paintings**

Dittborn, an internationally known Chilean artist, set the stage for a shifting direction in an artistic world fueled by social constructs but controlled by authorities. Although some prominent Chilean art critics, such as Ivelic and Galaz, contradict the idea that American Pop Art was influential to Chilean artists, art critic Waldemer Somer, in her essay *Mas Alla del Marco* states that Dittborn was influenced by Pop Art.<sup>1</sup> As part of Ivelic and Galaz's discussion in their book *Chile Arte Actual*, they mentioned influences from the United States. They explained the distance factor between Chile and the United States as being the major obstacle for such influence:

Mas aun, el arte Norteamericano en general no ha sido tomado en cuenta como modelo a traspasar. Siempre se ha producido una distancia con la cultura artística de los Estados Unidos, aunque siempre se ha tratado de aprovechar sus recursos tecnológicos y económicos por la vía de las becas, residencias transitorias o permanentes, fruto de un pragmatismo a la norteamericana, pero ahora practicado por Chilenos.<sup>2</sup>

Since Galaz and Ivelic are the leading Chilean art critics, their interpretations on foreign influences cannot be ignored. However, American Pop Art has clearly influenced the works of many Chilean artists, including Dittborn. Although Pop Art emerged in the United States during the 1950s, its influences spread to Chile about 20 years later: "During the seventies and early eighties, Dittborn worked simultaneously in a number of directions. He was highly involved in

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<sup>1</sup> Waldemer Somer, "Mas Alla del Marco," in *Pintura en Chile 1950-2005*, ed. Cecilia Valdes Urrutia (Santiago, Chile: Morgan Impresores S.A., 2006), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, *Chile Arte Actual*, 37. Moreover, the North American art in general has not been taken into account as a model to trespass. There has always been a distance with the artistic culture of the United States, although there has always been a tendency to take advantage of the technological and economic resources through scholarships, permanent or transitory residences, fruit of a North American pragmatism, but now practiced by Chileans.

graphics and video art, in a kind of ‘phobia of painting’ that he seemed to suffer.”<sup>3</sup> With an anti-painting idea in mind, Dittborn rescued identities from magazines and periodicals read by common people. His sources of inspiration were always Chile and the people who lived there. “La tematica de Eugenio Dittborn siempre se ha enraizado en nuestro pais. Transforma los tipicos colores en claros-curos de grises y negro y blanco triunfantes, semejantes a la forma en que la luz impacta en la sensibilidad de la pelicula fotografica.”<sup>4</sup> Regardless of foreign influences, Dittborn’s main influence and sources of inspiration were his own country and the Chilean experiences that surrounded him on a daily basis.

With a wide variety of materials and an artistic format not used before, Dittborn creates a series of compositions that fall between a new concept embedded in a socio-political context. His most well-known works of art are the *Airmail Paintings*. To create these paintings, Dittborn uses simple, inexpensive materials such as paint, charcoal, non-woven fabric, pen and ink, salt, and envelopes. He then connects them with techniques such as stitching, photo silkscreen, drawings, monotype, and embroidery. These paintings are large-scale mural-size compositions that have been arranged on a large piece of paper that has been pre-folded into smaller squares. The size of each square is determined by the size of the envelope in which this large composition will be placed. In many instances, the large-scale paper reaches up to 16 subdivisions delineated only by the fold produced in the paper. In other instances, these subdivisions are separated and reconnected using different blending methods. Each one of these subdivisions contains a message, a face, or perhaps a symbol, in which Dittborn uses a combination of appropriated photography, drawings, and some text. Folding is very significant in Dittborn’s paintings

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<sup>3</sup> De Los Rios, “Marks of Travel: Strategies in Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings.”

<sup>4</sup> Somer, “Mas Alla del Marco,” 191. Eugenio Dittborn’s theme has always been rooted in our country. It transforms the typical colors in chiaroscuros of grays and black, and triumphant whites, similar to the way light impacts the sensibility of photographic film.

because it serves more than one purpose. “The folds in the fabric serve not only to aid transportation, but to break the work into compartments, the boundaries of which are transgressed by hand-painted marks, wandering lines or stitches.”<sup>5</sup> The folding will be explained in detail in chapter five.

The appropriation of photographic images and their reproduction become crucial components in Dittborn’s development process. He uses images of people, specifically Chileans who have experienced some kind of misery. Most of these images are gathered from police archives from the 1920 to the 1930s. With the use of mug shots, Dittborn uses drawing to add, subtract, and/or combine with the lines of the portrait itself. After these steps have been executed and the composition seemingly completed, a last important step is implemented. Folding these large compositions into smaller squares and placing them inside of envelopes minimizes the size but keeps the meaning. The envelope will be the vehicle that transports these ideas around the world in order to be exhibited on a grand scale. Each envelope has a unique function, and, as a result, develops a unique character. The nature of an envelope is to store something inside to be later transported somewhere. As De los Rios explains, “The envelope is also a body in the sense that it contains something inside it. As a container, the envelope works as a metaphor of the notion of ‘home’ that is a constant in the imaginary of the Airmail Paintings.”<sup>6</sup>

Dittborn’s paintings are loaded with symbolism and conceptual ideas crucial for each painting’s development. From exhibition to exhibition, country to country, the recording of the visited cities will remain intact, leaving evidence of the journey. Although this recording process might be seen as “obsessive” by some, for others the journey through the postal service

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<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Exotic Chilean Packages,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1989, National Arts Week: Special Supplement 32.

<sup>6</sup> De los Rios, “Marks of Travel.”

represents an important step of the technique implemented by the artist. “The times, dates and locations charting their travels are marked on them in the artist’s handwriting. Such obsessive recordings are all part of the concept ‘airmail’ paintings by this Chilean artist.”<sup>7</sup> These recordings become “obsessive,” as De los Rios calls it, because they are part of the big strategy, and this strategy becomes the subject of the whole concept.

### **The Artistic Scene**

As an active member of the artistic community in Santiago, Dittborn participated in numerous social and intellectual activities and also belonged to a few artist associations. One of his major artistic contributions was his participation in the *Avanzada Group*, a Chilean art movement that aimed to challenge the formal aspect of the artistic tradition and intended to reveal new ideas through the use of innovative yet controversial techniques. This group also not only questioned the politics of the establishment, but also challenged its ideals. But living under a dictatorial regime, new ideas were not always welcomed. Founded in 1977, the *Avanzada Group* was born a few years after Chile was subjected to the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet and sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>8</sup>

Basically, the *Avanzada Group* proposed several ideas that protested against traditional painting. By opposing this classical medium of expression, they were also opposing the frame within the establishment that determined the parameters of a “masterpiece:” “Its most polemic stance developed from the critical radicalism of linguistic experimentation vehemently directed against the art-system.”<sup>9</sup> The artists who belonged to the *Avanzada Group* encountered several

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<sup>7</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Exotic Chilean Packages.”

<sup>8</sup> Although many consider this statement as a “conspiracy theory,” it is also backed by several sources that the CIA indeed worked as a vehicle to fuel the Chilean political atmosphere that unleashed the military coup in 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 24.

problems along the way. One such issue concerned artistic freedom, since artists were not allowed to express any political thought, much less an anti-government reflection.

During this period (1973-1990), most intellectuals were affected by the situation. Since the government did not allow freedom of expression, many of them left the country voluntarily; other intellectuals were forcefully exiled. However, some of them remained in the country and practiced a self-imposed limit of expression. If there was any artistic manifestation with political implications, the message would have not been clear enough. As a result, the meaning would have been open for interpretation. The idea of making art available to the public was expressed through pamphlets and posters that contained a distorted political message. Only those who agreed were able to understand, as Goldman explains: “It continued with posters of denunciation, with art of political dimension, and with acts of vanguard art whose hidden language permitted forbidden social commentary.”<sup>10</sup> Although Richard maintains that the dictatorship controlled the vocabulary of artistic expression, she admits that visual arts were perhaps the least affected by the government’s strict control. She suggests that the government felt less threatened by the visual arts. In other words, the *Avanzada Group* was “too little” or perhaps “too insignificant” to provoke a population revolt with its art. “Control was not applied evenly or with the same rigidity to every sector of cultural activity. Perhaps art was less victimized or effaced by the effects of censorship.”<sup>11</sup> According to Richard, *Avanzada* artists created works of art that had a hidden meaning to protect their expressive freedom from the government. However, despite their efforts to get their message across, Richard claims that these artists were excluded from the national and international artistic circuit. The national circuit was controlled by the government,

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<sup>10</sup> Goldman, “Dissidence and Resistance: Art in Chile under the Dictatorship,” 250.

<sup>11</sup> Richard, *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973* (Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986), 23.

and the international circuit did not care about results that had not been influenced by the international circuit itself.<sup>12</sup> Richard says that these artists, in order for the system to benefit them, had to somehow “camouflage” the political significance of their work. Without altering the “anti-government” meaning, these artists worked with the institution in order to benefit from it by receiving awards, scholarships, and access to biennales. With this move, the government acquired a reputation of being “liberal,” getting away with more than what was visible at first glance. Richard suggests that some kind of friction always existed between *Avanzada* and the institution. Some important artists had pushed for an artistic transition that would, in a way, forget the military coup and try to find continuity in the artistic line. Among them, the Chilean artist Carlos Maturana (“Bororo”) was a product of the artistic scene that developed during the dictatorship. As with many others, he tried to rescue painting and avoid political implications, and he was highly criticized. In an interview with Cecilia Valdes, Chilean art critic, Bororo explains:

Bororo recuerda que en la escena del arte de esa época en Chile ‘se dio algo singular, porque estábamos estos jóvenes Samy, Tacla, y yo y, por otro lado, se encontraban los conceptuales como Carlos Leppe y Nelly Richard. No nos tomaban en cuenta, porque pintábamos ‘monos’ y para nosotros, ellos eran unos lateros, pero en las fiestas lo pasábamos estupendo. También fuimos objetos de descalificaciones; por ejemplo, tiraron unos panfletos anónimos que decían que éramos unos fascistas alegres. Yo señale en el diario que no me importaba. Hoy al revisar esos años ochenta, me siento muy bien, porque de alguna manera fui como uno de los héroes que salvo la pintura. Me gusta ver generaciones completas que la han tomado como camino. Muchos vieron la pintura de nosotros y ahí se atrevieron.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>13</sup> Cecilia Valdes, “La Persistencia de la Pintura,” in *Pintura en Chile 1950-2005*, ed. Cecilia Valdes Urrutia (Santiago, Chile: Morgan Impresores S.A., 2006), 92. Bororo remembers that in the art scene of the time in Chile, something singular happened, because we were the young Samy, Tacla, and me, and on the other side, there were the conceptuels such as Carlos Leppe and Nelly Richard. They ignored us, because we were painting “monkeys” and for us, they were boring, but in the parties we had a great time. We were also subjected to disqualifications; for example, there were anonymous pamphlets thrown saying that we were happy fascists. I said on the paper that I did not care. Today, when reviewing those 1980s, I feel very good, because in a way I was like one of the heroes who saved painting. I like to see generations who have taken it as a path. Many saw our paintings and then ventured on it.

Bororo is important for many reasons. He belongs to a generation of artists who were trained during the dictatorship. He stayed in the country during this tumultuous period, challenged conceptualism, and gave painting another chance. While painting had not completely vanished, it had been replaced by other techniques—influenced by Roberto Matta and Nemesio Antunez—and Bororo provided a new vision. Although Bororo was a contemporary of the *Avanzada Group* artists, he opposed their artistic ideas. While one artist wanted to introduce conceptualism, the other wanted to rescue painting. Among the artists who followed a conceptual path was Dittborn, and as De los Rios explains, “Dittborn worked against fashion in an economic context where attempts were being made to impose a neo-liberal system. Instead of using the new, Dittborn uses the old, the already used, the second-hand thing, the quote.”<sup>14</sup>

Dittborn, among others, stayed in the country despite the political tension and artistic commotion. Although many critics portray him as the “leader” in artistic political protest, he never admitted to producing art that would clearly contradict the government and/or government artistic ideals. In this regard, Dittborn remained private about his opinion. Although his *Airmail Paintings* were not exhibited in Chile during the dictatorship years, they were produced in that context, and therefore, they silently represent a rebellion against the establishment in almost every aspect.

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<sup>14</sup> De los Rios, “Marks of Travel.”

CHAPTER 3  
A REBELLION AGAINST THE ESTABLISHMENT

**Art Then**

It is important to mention that Pinochet's dictatorship, from an artistic point of view, was divided into two sections, says Goldman. The first portion of this period (1973–1975) was defined as cleaning out the intellectual field; that is, the government forced universities to purge their personnel. Anybody who had a socialist view or the slightest communist view had to leave the establishment. During this period, many professors, artists, and intellectuals left Chile, but others stayed. In order to have a job or to remain active in their respective field, the government eliminated any politically oriented thought from their teachings, writings, and the arts:

The first [phase], from 1973 to 1975, was directed at the eradication of the cultural model that existed under Allende. This was the period of jailings, assassinations, and deportations of thousands of people, intended to destroy the political-social movements. The destruction of culture took the form of book burnings, whitewashing of murals, and the establishment of censorship which prohibited mention of violence, sex, or poverty in the fine arts, to say nothing of political criticism.<sup>1</sup>

For the second part of the dictatorship (1976–1990), according to Goldman, the government allowed the private sector to get involved and to patronize some artistic areas. With this move, more scholarships, exhibitions, and opportunities were offered to artists. However, the government controlled the meaning of artistic expression, as well as who exhibited and what was exhibited. Artists had to be very ingenious in order to express themselves and please the audience without raising the ire of the government. As Goldman explains, “It is under these circumstances that conscious dissident art could find an audience, using ingenuity and creativity to make a statement and avoid censorship.”<sup>2</sup> At first, it seemed like many opportunities would arise, but shortly thereafter it was clear that the meaning of anything sponsored in the private

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, “Dissidence and Resistance,” 256.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

sector would also be regulated by the government. As a result, many exhibitions aimed to show academic art. For some viewers, this kind of art was considered “beautiful,” but for others it was considered art without meaning. The public not only became accustomed to the idea of “beautiful art,” but they felt comfortable around it. Eventually, it was the art they wanted to see in galleries and museums. This is the setting in which Dittborn and other artists developed their own theme. Goldman states that during this period four kinds of artistic expression occurred in Chile: art sponsored by the government, art constituted by symbols meant to oppose the government but only understood by a few people, clandestine art, and art in exile.<sup>3</sup> The work of Dittborn would fall into the second category described by Goldman: art constituted by symbols.

### **An Anti-Fascist Statement**

The idea of Refractory art arose during this period. Artists from the *Avanzada Group* as well as independents decided to create anti-fascist art that would not only contradict the government, but also would make it impossible for the government to understand, and therefore to appreciate and/or condemn. By not being able to appreciate the artistic rendering of these artists, the government would theoretically not take a position on the final art. Richard explains that if the artistic product was not beneficial for the economy, then it had less importance. In other words, the government was more concerned with capitalistic development, and the arts did not play an important role.<sup>4</sup> The invention of Refractory art speaks about the need to escape from something rather than the need to create something. It is interesting to see how artistic movements and tendencies find their way into mainstream society. In most cases, new artistic expressions result from boredom with the previous tendency, but in the case of Refractory art, it

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

<sup>4</sup> Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 4.

was a way of escaping the oppressive system. Richard states, “Refractory art ... was designed—in Chile—to escape military authoritarianism and the censorship administered by the official culture.”<sup>5</sup> The artistic scene before the dictatorship aimed to follow a Marxist model in which intellectuals sought to provide cultural venues such as literature and art as the main components of social structure and social recreation. When the military coup happened in 1973, all those ideals were destroyed. Social oppression became evident, and artists felt the need to produce a social change through their art. Richard states: “During this period, social oppression was so great that the artists desperately tried to escape the limitations imposed on them by the regime, to abolish the rules of language rigidly controlling experience....”<sup>6</sup> Although Dittborn did not publicly admit that his art was a protest against the government it is obvious that most aspects of his work did in fact rebel against the establishment, making his art, by consequence, even more innovative and interesting.

In art, revisions by Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn ... disrupted the academic legacy of the national pictorial tradition as a first subsystem of falsities and falsifications to question and reformulate ... depaginated the historical-national sequence of the official art tradition by interrupting it with the memories-in-negative censored and repressed by its canonical past.<sup>7</sup>

While Dittborn did not exhibit his *Airmail Paintings* during the dictatorship, he did create them at that time. Exhibiting them during Pinochet’s dictatorship might have incurred the government’s wrath. Instead, he silently produced the *Airmail Paintings* during this period. Some might think that by not exhibiting during the dictatorship, Dittborn automatically diminished the value of these paintings. However, even though he did not make them available

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Richard, *Margins and Institutions*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 12-13.

to the public until the end of Pinochet's era, all the choices related to the paintings represent a rebellion against the establishment.

The subject matter was new. Not only was it different-new, but it was controversial-new. After the 1973 military coup, new conceptual ideas and the use of ready-mades were unpopular moves. Considering that government-sponsored art aimed to imitate the classics, existing artists did not have many opportunities to emerge, and new artists were shaped according to the new model the government had designed. For Dittborn, the appropriation of portraits of people contradicted the establishment in two ways. First, the idea of appropriation was new during this period. Using another artist's work to represent something else had not only not been done before, but it was not welcomed. Second, when the government sponsors a type of art that aims to provoke a sense of "beauty" in the eyes of the viewer, imagery such as the ones used by Dittborn becomes a problem.

In addition, when the subject matter is embedded in allegorical messages and symbolic compositions, some people might not understand, and therefore might not approve. According to Brett, Dittborn's exploration of a new genre, with a different approach in terms of materials, set him apart from the rest of the artists of this period: "In another sense the disturbing and challenging effect of the new genre happens because it has not yet been constituted as an artistic genre. Its legitimation is given by the cultural institution which in the process removes it from the sphere of life to the museum and robs it of efficacy...."<sup>8</sup> Seconding Brett, De los Rios agrees that Dittborn's paintings provide a new genre. In this sense, she explains that the paintings can also be seen as maps. Not only do the envelopes provide the geographical locations to which the paintings are traveling, but the paintings themselves are also folded in the same way as travel

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<sup>8</sup> Brett, "Dust Clouds," 63.

maps, and in order to be able to read the information contained inside of them, the envelopes need to be opened. Since these two instances of genre had not been established as genre during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in Chile, Dittborn's work becomes a problem to the advocates of government-sponsored art.

Perhaps one of the most significant consequences of the dictatorial government is that an artistic gap was inevitable. In *Apuntes Para una Reflexión*, Galaz and Ivelic explain that most of the artists (painters) left the country either voluntarily or were forced out by the government, and as a result, a major breach in painting resulted. According to the authors, this painting gap gave opportunity to performance art, installation art and action art.<sup>9</sup> So far, academic art accepted formalistic techniques, such as painting and sculpture, but Dittborn introduces an entirely new variety of elements that have not been seen before, and have not yet been evaluated much less appreciated. As a result, this move also becomes a rebellion: "Desde un comienzo, las obras de Dittborn ... demostraron no calzar con ninguno de los 'lugares comunes' de la sensibilidad politica de la cultura de oposicion, ni con los estereotipos tematicos o expresivos amoldados por el ideario progresista nacional."<sup>10</sup> I will further analyze the issue of the technique and its relationship with the current political situation in chapters 5 and 6.

Censorship not only put limitations on the artistic outcome, but it created an atmosphere that for some reason did not allow this kind of rebellious art to flow much less to flourish. In a sense, the lack of artistic education and production was due to the imposition of censorship. Although the government seemed to be an advocate for the arts, its impositions aggravated the problem. In this sense, Galaz and Ivelic explain: "La carencia de proyeccion cultural que impide

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<sup>9</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, "Apuntes Para una Reflexión," 39.

<sup>10</sup> Richard, *La Estratificación de los Márgenes* (Santiago, Chile: Art & Text Publications, 1989), 12. Since the beginning, Dittborn's work ... demonstrated to be unfit for the 'common places' of the political sensibility of the opposition, and the thematic or expressive stereotypes molded by the national progressive ideal.

ver en estas obras una proposición válida y legítima de nuestro tiempo. Por el solo hecho de no adecuarse a una normativa estética ... quedan excluidas de la memoria cultural de un pueblo.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Richard explains that censorship during the dictatorship influenced the way Chileans understand the meaning of open dialogue even today. One of the biggest challenges of the post-dictatorship government was to re-open the intellectual doors and to enhance the possibilities for artistic criticism. The idea of open dialogue is important because it permits the development of art criticism and art analysis. The most important exercise associated with art appreciation has always been considering the subject matter of each piece and recognizing the meaning of works. The work of Dittborn is no different. It is charged with a subject matter influenced by diverse contexts producing different interpretations of its meaning. Open dialogue about the work of Dittborn is crucial in understanding this artist.

There is an undeniable truth about Dittborn’s paintings: they are attached to a human condition that translates into pain and suffering. This condition is placed in a socio-political context that influences the perception of his art. Whether the artist intends to enhance or to hide that fact, the context of dictatorship is present. In chapter 4, I will analyze in detail Dittborn’s approach to human suffering.

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<sup>11</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, *Chile Arte Actual*, 173. The lack of cultural projection is what prevents us to see a valid and legitimate proposal of our times. By not adapting to an aesthetic normative ... they become excluded from the cultural memory of a nation.

## CHAPTER 4 A SYMBOLICAL SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

### **Who are the Protagonists?**

Dittborn focuses mainly on human desolation. With this theme in mind, he incorporates images of natives from Tierra del Fuego in the southern part of Chile, criminals' mug shots that have been recovered from police archives from the 1920s to the 1950s, images of mentally ill people taken from the archives of a mental hospital in Santiago, and photos of bodies long disposed of by the dictatorial government, and later found buried in the Atacama Desert (north of Chile). In order to use some of the political portraits, he had to request permission from the surviving families of those who had died. With the consent of the victims' families, Dittborn today still produces and reproduces imagery that revives the memory of the dictatorship's victims.

As previously mentioned, some of these images represent a rebellion against the establishment. Their existence in the minds of the people and their presence in an artistic venue in a way slander the government. Although his imagery is not completely forbidden, it is taboo for many. In a way, Dittborn is trying to dig up the past to bring it into the present. While many interpretations can be deduced from his paintings, the basic idea, according to Somer, is that they represent a tragic human condition:

Desde un punto de vista global, los trabajos de Eugenio Dittborn provocan una sensación de un fluyente río de imágenes emparentadas entre sí, aunque sujetas a variaciones. Dentro de su coherencia formal y conceptual, cada una de sus partes ofrece al espectador un verdadero abanico de interpretaciones. Sin embargo, todas descansan sobre una base bien definida: la visión trágica de la condición humana.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Somer, "Mas Alla del Marco," 191. From a global point of view, Eugenio Dittborn's work provokes a sensation of a flowing river of images connected with each other, although subjected to variations. Within its formal and conceptual coherence, each one of its parts offers to the spectator a real array of interpretations. However, all of them rest over a well-established base: the tragic vision of a human condition.

Adriana Valdes, Chilean critic, also agrees that Dittborn's work captures a miserable human condition. To describe this condition, she uses phrases such as: "exhausted faces of the male and female thieves ... faces drawn by schizophrenics shut up in the Psychiatric Hospital of Santiago, in Chile ... sensation of a drained, lifeless body...."<sup>2</sup>

Using imagery that represents human misery implies a heavy political protest. These images have been symbolically connected in order to provide the "political hint" without overdoing it, without being so obvious. In other words, Dittborn had to be careful of the possible consequences. This allegorical inclination becomes a necessary component in Dittborn's art. It is a way to channel a certain meaning that could be understood only by a few, although seen by many.

### **The Allegorical Aspect**

The term "allegory" comes from the Greek *allegoria*, "narrative description of a subject under the guise of another having similarities to it."<sup>3</sup> In other words, allegory can be understood as a story in which real characters are represented symbolically, that is, allegories can in fact have more than one meaning. According to Craig Owens, "Allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure."<sup>4</sup> In his essay *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, Owens analyzes the connections between allegories and contemporary art. The first connection is the appropriation of images. This process consists of the reproduction and manipulation of one work of art (including images) in order to create another work of art. One of the most significant examples is Sherrie Levine's *Fountain* after

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<sup>2</sup> Adriana Valdes, "A Winter Shade of Pale," in *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales* (London: ICA, 1993), 37.

<sup>3</sup> See *Oxford Dictionary*.

<sup>4</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," 316.

Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917. From Owens's point of view, the allegory here would be the second meaning assigned to the second fountain created by Levine. By adding a second meaning, Levine is replacing the previous allegorical connotations presented by Duchamp. Of course, much criticism has been raised regarding this idea of appropriation. Formalist critics, such as Krauss, have denounced its use, and argued that appropriation is one of the worst situations that could have happened to art. According to Owens, "This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance."<sup>5</sup>

A certain allegorical component is seen in Dittborn's art: the use of mug shots. Mug shots of criminals and native people who had been imprisoned during the 1920s to the 1930s are now being used as a component of contemporary art created between 1973 and 1989. The idea of reproducing an old photograph to be inserted in a present setting clearly speaks of the alteration of the meaning that the artist is trying to provoke. Not only is he bringing those historical facts back to the present, but he is also intertwining them with another group of people (natives). Is Dittborn trying to make a statement? He is, of course, providing new meaning. These mug shots represent criminals and native people. Why does he put them together? By being able to produce conceptual art and to use appropriation, Dittborn is trying to make a connection between these groups of people. Indigenous people and colonialism are the two main components of the history of Latin America. In this sense, Dan Cameron, art critic and curator, explains that, "Dittborn sees these relatively recent events as deeply inscribed in the country's collective psyche ... recalling the collision of indigenous and colonial cultures that has set the tone of the South American continent's history. Using the metaphors of travel and home, he brings these two histories

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 317.

together in his art.”<sup>6</sup> Criminals—by being criminals—are considered people who live in some kind of misery. On the other hand, indigenous people could be perfectly happy as a group, but as history has repeatedly denounced them, indigenous people from many regions of the world have been abused, and those from Chile were no exemption. In an era when the dictatorship was openly endorsed by the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church was openly opposed to indigenous people, Dittborn sees an opportunity to make an analogy between criminals and indigenous people, not because both act as “anti-social” groups, but because together they share a certain level of misery. The appropriation of a portrait-based image is essential to Dittborn’s endeavor. According to Richard, Dittborn works until today in these portrait-based arts. With the new government’s attempt to move on and leave the past behind, the prevalent tendency is to forget those who disappeared and were never found. Richard explains Dittborn’s intention by making them reappear:

Dittborn made the image of these bodies recirculate as a new item. And he did so when Chile had stopped being news worthy on the ideological market of international solidarity culture, since democratic normalization had trivialized the tensions that served Chilean anti dictatorial art as a contestatory emblem. Among other things, Dittborn’s work posed the problem of the visibility and legibility of representations of memory as a zone where the relationships between concealment and disclosure—negotiated by certain reading priorities arranging the selection of what is representable and what is underrepresented—might emerge.<sup>7</sup>

The second connection that Owens makes between allegory and contemporary art concerns “site-specificity [:] the work which appears to have merged physically into its setting, to be embedded in the place where we encounter it.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, site-specificity is a work that directly relates to the place where it is displayed. Owens uses the *Spiral Jetty* by Robert

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Cameron, “Eugenio Dittborn: Return to Sender,” *Art Forum International* 31 (1993), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 318.

Smithson to articulate his thoughts. The monumentality of the *Spiral Jetty* represents its allegorical aspect by tracing it back into the prehistoric era. What is even more allegorical in the *Spiral Jetty* is the idea that the work of art is temporary, and it will one day decay with the passage of time. With this thought in mind, it is necessary to preserve or maintain its memory. The best way to preserve it is through photography, which will encapsulate its monumentality for the years to come. In his essay, Owens refers to Benjamin's input on photography: "an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity is one of the strongest impulses in allegory."<sup>9</sup>

This connection can also be traced to Dittborn's art. The idea of his *Airmail Paintings* traveling around the world, being presented in different settings surrounded by a diverse group of people, goes beyond the "opportunity" that a Chilean artist might have to exhibit abroad. The idea of traveling and immersion in other cultures is what Dittborn is trying to accomplish. Ideas of history and distance are present in this concept, leaving no doubt that allegorical implications are ubiquitous. Dittborn is sending abroad not just one image but a group of images that have been placed together in order to provide a certain message or idea. In this sense, he uses appropriation and repetition to create his photomontages.

Owens also mentions the presence of allegory in photomontage. Photomontage is a technique that consists of the assemblage of several different photos. They can come from one source, or from various sources. As a conclusion Owens stated that "appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization—these diverse strategies characterize much of the art of the present and distinguish it from its modern predecessors."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 321.

Owens also describes the difference between a symbol and an allegory. Not only does he declare that they are completely different, but also he affirms that one is subordinated to the other. In simple words, an allegory is a conscious move and a symbol is intuitive. While the definition of allegory is not the definition of a symbol, a fine line is drawn between them. To expand on this definition, Owens says that an “allegory is conceived as a supplement, ‘an expression to another expression.’”<sup>11</sup> By being something that can be attached to something else, an allegory can easily be removed from a work of art. As a result, he explains that Modernism, the art period that heavily criticized allegory, can perhaps re-evaluate the works of art it produced from a non-allegorical point of view. Owens also concludes that allegory not only can work as an addition to a work of art or a piece of literature, but also can serve as a substitute. With this thought in mind, it is important to go back to the idea of appropriation, which is, according to Owens, the first connection between contemporary art and allegory.

Dittborn’s use of allegory is without a doubt a conscious move. Many implications can be seen in his choices. From the choice of materials to the compositional aspect of his work, Dittborn provides historical and social events that can be interpreted in different ways. Richard explains: “Instead Dittborn’s work, operated by the inversion of signs, transfers criticism from the meaning of power to the power of meaning.”<sup>12</sup> These ideas were applied to instances where the distribution of power, typical of all major cities, was unequal. Even today, Santiago represents the major cultural center of Chile. Cultural events happening in provinces are not considered as important, or even sometimes deemed completely irrelevant to the world of arts.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>12</sup> Richard, “The Others,” in *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales*, (London: ICA, 1993), 58.

Although most critics emphasize the subject matter as being the most important component in Dittborn's art, it is the significance of the technique that really constitutes the subject itself.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCEPTUAL IDEAS IN TRAVEL MODE

With a self-explanatory title, Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings* have a predetermined purpose: they are meant to travel. According to some critics, the idea is to inform the world of the brutalities created by the Chilean government: "These hybrid paintings not only call attention to the traditional form and its complicity with the academy and the market; they also signal its crisis and difficulties in coming to terms with realities not addressed historically in its gaze and visual scope."<sup>1</sup> In other words, these paintings were important not only for their role objecting to formalistic art, but for their aim to portray social realities that had been ignored. However, the artist claims that he has been misinterpreted on many occasions, and that the purpose of these traveling images is to find a home—a resting place.

By citing police photos of criminals from 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in my work, I've tried to explore a specific and contradictory relationship: the collision between the police camera, a camera that is really the power of the state working visually, and the faces of small-time Chilean criminals, men and women, most of them impoverished rural migrants ... They are nothing but the photos in their files. I have not been well understood on this point. I have been working not with marginalized criminals but with the precise petrified moment when they are coerced by the power—the photographic power—of the state, and multiplied by it, in print.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the nature of these paintings, the artist must have carefully thought about the disseminating process before even beginning to produce them. The idea of distribution not only influenced the format in which they would be presented, but the materials would also play an important role. Sean Cubitt, Director of the Media and Communications Program at the University of Melbourne, Australia, in his essay *An Airmail Interview*, mentions the idea of volume in Dittborn's paintings. Going from the smallest possible form—inside of an envelope—

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Zamudio-Taylor, "Eugenio Dittborn, Remota: Airmail Paintings," *Art Nexus* 25 (1997): 49.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Merino, "Marks of the Journey," in *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, ed. Patrick Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 253.

to the largest thought plan exhibited at an art gallery or museum, Dittborn makes the concept of volume an important aspect of his artistic thought. According to Cubitt, Dittborn also explains that in order to understand the meaning of his work, one must first understand the structure of such a work that is divided into two “forms.” Dittborn says: “The first occurs while they are being moved from one place to another ... folded and in envelopes: in other words, their epistolary and volumetric form. The second occurs once they arrive at their destination, when they are unfolded, hung up and exhibited next to the empty envelopes, in other words the pictorial and planimetric form.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, when the paintings are folded inside of the envelope ready to be shipped, the envelope becomes as important as the painting in a large-scale hanging on a museum wall. Both stages are compromised. Considering that transporting art has never been easy and/or inexpensive, the choice of materials plays a crucial role in this development.

First, paintings must have a format that allows for easy transportation. Second, the materials must be light enough to avoid excess weight. Third, the paintings must allow for the possibility of misplacement in order to avoid insurance fees. And last, but not least, the artist must consider the local and international postal service’s rules in order to successfully execute the process. Raul Zamudio presents a critique of Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings*. He mentions that Dittborn’s art had always had political implications, but he does so in a way that politics does not really interfere with the art itself:

Dittborn’s work has always had a political valence, though his politics operate and are articulated in an expansive purview that is more often literary and open-ended rather than literal and ambiguous. In other words, what separates Dittborn from those whose work is political in orientation is his deft way of side-stepping the overbearing weight of didacticism that political art can occasionally engender. And this is partially due to his

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<sup>3</sup> Sean Cubitt, “An Airmail Interview,” in *MAPA: Airmail Paintings/Pinturas Aeropostales* (London: ICA, 1993), 25.

formal and conceptual use of vehicles of dissemination, such as the postal system, which broadens the narratives in his pictures to include actual social space, not usually the province of painting or art.<sup>4</sup>

So the idea is to take a different route: a non-formal choice of materials, simple in nature and flexible in form. Once the choice of materials has been determined, the execution of the message must be kept in mind while thinking about the format. Zamudio's remarks demonstrate that the importance of Dittborn's paintings goes beyond the political meaning, and it is necessary to look at their conceptual variants that surround them.

### **Unusual Materials**

As previously mentioned, the artist uses inexpensive materials such as paint, charcoal, non-woven fabric, pen and ink, salt, and envelopes, and connects them with techniques such as stitching, photo silkscreen, drawings, monotype, and embroidery. In addition, he uses photography in the form of appropriation in order to execute his compositions, along with drawings and the use of some text. The idea to produce anti-academic art would not only contradict the government's ideals, but also would explore unknown territories using different media and an entirely new concept.

Dittborn investigated this situation of the 'human countenance.' A human face photographed by the machine of visual reproduction, to the point of extracting the analytical and metaphorical keys of a coercive plot, a plot that signaled procedures for detaining and capturing photographic identity: the prison of framing the shot, the straightjacket of the pose, the sentence of the montage, the prison term of the photo's edge, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Photography played an important role in the course of Chilean art. Nelly Richard argues that photography burst into the history of Chilean art: "El recurso fotografico interrumpe bruscamente el historial academico nacional; marca la discontinuacion de la tradición de la

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<sup>4</sup> Raul Zamudio, "Eugenio Dittborn," *Art Nexus* 54 no.3 (2004): 155.

<sup>5</sup> Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 8.

pintura chilena y la apertura de su campo referencial.”<sup>6</sup> According to Richard, many artists started using this media to represent reality by manipulating the form. As with Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings*, other artists also implemented techniques, such as cropping, juxtaposition, and photomontage to portray their message. In this sense, Richard explains that photography was seen as a vehicle for image transformation: “Here photography is understood as an apparatus for the visual manipulation of objective reality, as a technique for reproducing and serializing the image, as a standard for popular aesthetics, as an instrument of social perception.”<sup>7</sup> This explosion of photographic works of art occurred during 1977 and lasted until around 1980. Richard claimed that Dittborn is the most important artist to use this media and technique.

### **Disseminating Method**

Because the *Airmail Paintings* are meant to travel, the most important aspect of their format is the way in which they are assembled, and the capacity they have for easy and quick disassembly. Considering the purpose and the core implications of these paintings, the idea of format is as important as the choice of materials. Because the materials have to be light and easy to transport, the format must complement that idea, so Dittborn chose a design that allows for the paintings to be attached and detached easily. Keeping in mind that most of his compositions are mural size, this task becomes very important for successful disseminating, if not the most important. In a dialogue with the Chilean critic Roberto Merino, Dittborn expands his views on this idea. The dialogue starts with a discussion of the use of “precariousness” in Dittborn’s work. Although it seems that Dittborn and Merino have a different understanding of the meaning of “precariousness,” Dittborn explains that precariousness in his work can be seen as a way to

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<sup>6</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, “Apuntes Para una Reflexión,” 40.

<sup>7</sup> Richard, *Margins and Institutions*, 38.

easily mount and dismount pieces of art: “You could say that precariousness, in my work, consists in the fact that the elements connected together there are provisionally connected.”<sup>8</sup>

Dittborn also explains that none of the materials and connections he makes can be seen as permanent. This idea is important because it enhances the notion that these paintings must allow for two volumetric formats in order to provide the expected outcome.

As part of the disseminating process of these paintings, placing them inside of an envelope of a certain size requires some folding. Since many of the compositions are considerably large, they would require several folds; some folds even turn into 16 subdivisions. When the paintings reach their exhibiting destinations, they must be unfolded in order to be mounted in their assigned exhibiting space. The process of unfolding the painting provides a new character to the composition. Suddenly an imaginary grid appears that is delineated by the folding itself; however, no drawn lines are present. Phyllis Woolcock makes a significant observation regarding Dittborn’s folding of the paper or canvas: “All his work has the in-commonness of the image being folded into 16 equal parts and this usually means that the centre is no longer the focal point.”<sup>9</sup> This idea is important because the center of the composition is no longer at the center. Moving the focal point of the composition somewhere else or avoiding it altogether becomes a problem in formalistic art. This idea of going against the prevalent artistic current overlaps with the notion that Dittborn’s art represents a rebellion against the establishment. Challenging the establishment is an idea that grew during the dictatorship. In this sense, Richard explains Dittborn’s way of dealing with “cultural power”:

[First], the envelopes: ... mocks the established protocols by slipping itself into the dominant circuit of operations by camouflaging a painting as a letter. [Second], the work

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<sup>8</sup> Roberto Merino, “Marks of the Journey,” 250.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Woolcock, “New Shows Accent the Different,” *Courier-Mail* (1987): 1.

dismantles the hypothesis of the neutrality of the pictorial surface ... but also shows the marks of the bureaucratic processes which are part of the history of the work's journey. [Third], the work establishes the centre as simply another stage.<sup>10</sup>

Dittborn's art proved to be unconventional because from the very beginning his art was not what the establishment expected, and much less what the public wanted to see. Richard states that artists who produced this type of art in a post-dictatorship period did not meet the new government standards, and they became part of a minority of artists who failed to portray what "the public wanted to see." The idea of cultural power also involves the bureaucracy represented by museums, especially those endorsed by the government.

A museum has several requirements for art shipments. The packaging must meet certain standards, the size must be kept in mind, insurance issues must be dealt with, and every aspect of liability associated with mounting and dismounting a work of art must be recognized. In Dittborn's situation, many of those problems are no longer issues to worry about. The format chosen by the artist allows for easy transport and less paperwork. In this sense, these paintings represent another form of rebellion against the establishment, but there is also evidence of a new technique.

Much confusion surrounds these *Airmail Paintings*. Some critics believe that the socio-political meaning is what is most important and evident, but these critics have a tendency to ignore the significance of the technique itself. While the socio-political message of Dittborn's work is important and visually evident, his paintings' significance lies in the format, materials, and disseminating method. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of his works in relation to the context in which they were created and the context in which they are distributed.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard, "The Others," 60-61.

CHAPTER 6  
FROM CHILE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD

**When Distance Matters**

A considerable geographical distance lies between Chile and the United States or Europe. This distance has not only prohibited or delayed the possibility for artistic influences, but it has also created some room for misconceptions and misunderstandings about Latin America as a whole, especially Latin American art. Adriana Valdes, mentions globalization and how the issue of “distance” has changed in meaning. She implies that distance is not a problem in Dittborn’s paintings. However, Dittborn seems to disagree, because he mentions that in terms of “ignorance about Latin America,” there is still a great distance between Latin America and the United States or Europe. In a round table conversation with art critics in the United States, the issue of distance was discussed, and Dittborn explained to Valdes that “between you and me, the distance allows irony, subtleties, games, contradictions, paradoxes. When you talk to them [U.S. critics], none of this is possible.”<sup>1</sup> In Dittborn’s eyes, the big cultural divide is due to geographical distance between the different continents. According to Nelly Richard, Dittborn tries to reconstruct through imagery a definition that would encapsulate Latin America, and perhaps show the world a reality that has been misunderstood. Dittborn defines this idea of Latin America by deconstructing different subcategories of the whole: popular and national popular, and the archaic and the primordial.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Richard says that in order to tell the story, Dittborn uses more than one technique:

Dittborn’s work narrates the history of discontinuous memories and interrupted traditions ... This deliberate mixing of multiple techniques from dissimilar historico-social complexes takes account of Latin America’s “multi-temporal heterogeneity,” a mix of

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<sup>1</sup> Adriana Valdes, “A Winter Shade of Pale,” 29.

<sup>2</sup> Richard, “The Others,” 52-58.

signs which display a variety of fragmentary provenances in a jumble of languages disjointed by the clash of contexts.<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to show the rest of the world what Chile has to say, Dittborn developed the idea of *Airmail Paintings* as a vehicle of information concerning a country and a culture about which little is known. In this sense, his paintings are important pieces of information that speak about Latin American people and the socio-political issues associated with them. Whether these paintings are understood or misunderstood, the idea of restricting distance is what makes them important in the Chilean and international artistic world.

Just as a great distance exists between Chile and the United States or Europe, Chile also has distance within its own borders. Dittborn touches upon ideas of urban center and periphery, signaling the extremities that can appear within a same culture. In this sense, Richard reinforces the idea of extremities: “In Dittborn, the Latin American is a construct of signs in conflict which come together and fall apart: myth and progress, pre-industry and techno-culture, legend and simulation, traditions and market, orality and telecommunications, rite and news, etc.”<sup>4</sup> The idea of social differences is important because it enhances the notion of social distribution and class separation that was much encouraged during the dictatorship. Jose Joaquin Bruner, in his book *Espejos Trizados: Ensayos Sobre Cultura y Politicas Culturales*, successfully describes the problems seen in Chilean society. But instead of doing it in a critical and diminishing manner, Bruner emphasizes the core of our current society’s functions that are clearly a consequence of the socio-political situation. For example, Bruner says that due to all the political attempts for change (under the Marxist government, dictatorship, post-dictatorship, and in the present), Chilean society became an “insecure society” unable to laugh at itself. Instead, as a protection

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 57.

mechanism, Chileans tend to laugh at other cultures, other people, even people with physical problems. This observation is important because with this distance between social classes, mockery from higher classes toward lower social classes became prevalent. Although not publicly accepted by the government, an atmosphere favored the higher class. The dictatorship brought capitalism with it, and capitalism opened new doors for entrepreneurs, the national corporate sector, and even the international corporate sector. Levels of inequality rose and social classes clashed.

Luis Cecereu briefly introduces the influences of a military government in his essay *El Cine Chileno en los Laberintos del Desarrollo*. Cecereu argues that the changes produced in cinema were immediately noticeable because of the censorship associated with a dictatorship. Chile experienced an immediate closing off from [?] the rest of the world, especially from Europe and the rest of Latin America. Although several critics saw Chile's growing economy as the only positive development during Pinochet's government, Cecereu sees it as a "virulent force" that allowed the development of a "third world capitalism." Misery and poverty increased while capitalism flourished. He explains: "La encomia Chilena permite vivir un consumismo a escala subdesarrollada. Eran los años de un boom económico que, como suele suceder, deja al desnudo no pocas miserias ... el modelo económico mostraba sus debilidades, mientras se intuía una apertura de áspero dialogo y heridas no cicatrizadas."<sup>5</sup> As with Bruner and Cecereu, Richard also touches upon this social situation in Chile. In her essay *Periferias Culturales y Descentramientos Postmodernos*, Richard analyzes the role of the different branches of government, as well as its cultural powers. She searches for answers to questions associated with the government and the intellectual sector, always trying to find clashes and disagreements. She

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<sup>5</sup> Cecerau, "El Cine Chileno en los Laberintos del Subdesarrollo," 29.

builds her case for the problematic that surrounds the arts in Chile. Richard also emphasizes the difference between downtown and “periferia” (ghetto), suggesting that the opportunities provided for each of those different sectors were, obviously unequal.<sup>6</sup> Dittborn, on the other hand, tries to rescue the faces of those who are viewed as different, and makes society confront [?] them in an artistic manner, perhaps to change society’s views of these faces outside the periphery. Guy Brett makes an interesting comparison between the works of Dittborn and the works of Andy Warhol, but he makes an obvious and important distinction between the two: Brett spots the difference between both “massive reproductions.” On the one hand, Warhol’s faces are mechanically repeated and associated with an “elite” symbol. On the other hand, Dittborn’s faces are different. They are in the same “repetition” pattern, but instead of being associated with the elite, his faces are associated with the poor, lower classes of Chile.<sup>7</sup>

Richard states that the distance between the past and the present—and how we deal with it—is established in Dittborn’s art as well. She says that Dittborn’s exhibition of “detail” brings up the issue of memory:

Dittborn makes his images travel through time, detaching them from their historical moment in the context of social temporalities full of accelerations or decelerations ... Dittborn mobilizes the sources of the past by displacing and recombining the images documenting it until the memory-object reified in the fixity of the photograph, explodes.<sup>8</sup>

As she does elsewhere, Richard argues that Dittborn uses imagery that corresponds to people from the 1920s to the 1950s. These images have been taken from national archives. In *The Others*, Richard suggests that on the lines of memory through photography, artists such as Dittborn use imagery from the past to represent a brutality (military coup in 1973) happening in

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<sup>6</sup> Nelly Richard, “Periferias Culturales y Descentramientos Posmodernos,” *Casa de las Américas* 186 (1992) 127.

<sup>7</sup> Brett, “Dust Clouds.” 64.

<sup>8</sup> Richard, “The Others,” 48.

the present. Since this was the period where Dittborn was actively producing art, she makes the assumption that it is safe to use imagery from the past to represent the present:

It is not simply that photographs from the past (archive documents) can be used to denounce the abuses of the present (the dictatorship in Chile) .... By unearthing the news buried in old photographs and projecting it into the present ... Dittborn also allowed the contingency to become clear: he stressed that disappearance is above all a question of removal from circulation.<sup>9</sup>

She explains that by reviving these photographs and circulating them again, he is bringing back to life those bodies that disappeared during the military rule, and he “allegorizes memory as ruin and unearthing.”<sup>10</sup> As mentioned earlier, the use of allegory is clearly present in Dittborn’s work. He uses it as a tool to sketch the political meaning of his works, but always keeps it subtle and discrete. Richard adds the idea of “mass production” in terms of identities and photographs. She clarifies that “mass production” “is one of the many lapses of identity that Dittborn’s work meticulously explores.”<sup>11</sup>

She mentions the idea of memory as both a monument and a document, being the two ways in which memory is represented during a transition process. However, she says that art and literature are able to represent memory in a different way. Most significantly, Richard points out that representing a memory that has been destroyed becomes one of the most challenging tasks of artistic representation—perhaps an obstacle in the effort to rebuild a post-dictatorship society. How do we represent memories of loss during dictatorship without bringing dictatorship to life again? By bringing memories to life, we are trying to insert ideas of the past into a modern setting. She refers to this modern setting with descriptive words such as “neoliberalism” and “capitalist globalization,” and highlights the clash of ideas between the past and present.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 52.

Although all of the governments Chile had after the dictatorship have openly opposed the dictatorship's ideals, capitalism remains as one of the core sources of development for the country. This trend inevitably produces clashes between ideals and facts, and the memory remains because many wounds remain open.

In Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings*, the idea of memory is prevalent because in a search to revive memory, Dittborn uses images of the past as the core of his compositions. He gives them not only an important place in the present, but also sends these images around the world so that other cultures can also witness the significance of memory in Chilean society. The idea of memory and dictatorship cannot be separated, because memory was born during the years of the dictatorship. The next section analyzes the meaning of Dittborn's work from the context of dictatorship.

### **The Dictatorship Effect**

How do we deal with the consequences of dictatorship? This is a question that Richard explores deeply in her books and essays. She has divided this portion of the Chilean history into three main categories: Destruction, Reconstruction, and Deconstruction. Destruction refers to the period of the military coup and the years that follow, including Pinochet's administration. Reconstruction refers to the period after Pinochet's era when more moderate governments tried to lead the country in a post-dictatorship environment. Deconstruction refers to the present, when new issues and implications have taken place, among them the issue of memory and its respective reconstruction.

Pinochet's dictatorship is perceived differently in all of these stages. His dictatorship affected Chile as a whole, but it is also true that its consequences are perceived differently according to personal experiences. These personal experiences vary from person to person, from country to country. In Chile, for example, those most affected were Chileans who had lost loved

ones. Without a doubt, their voices are the most powerful. However, other Chileans did not experience such horrors, but were still affected by the restrictions imposed by the regime. But nothing could be compared to those whose relatives were murdered and/or disappeared. Furthermore, views on dictatorship can vary from country to country. Political history and social suffering would also play an important role in the perception of a dictatorship. The definition of a dictatorship is well established in international literature, and prohibiting the right to a democracy is repudiated in most countries.

In the case of Dittborn's *Airmail Paintings*, some misconceptions arise, as mentioned earlier. Most critics think that the meaning of Dittborn's work is solely political, and with that idea in mind they try to dig deeper into the dictatorship itself. In a conversation between Dittborn and Sean Cubitt, Dittborn explains that it is very difficult to explain his work in an international setting where ideas of dictatorship have already been pre-established. As mentioned earlier, his art has been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and most of the time overlooked. Dittborn explains the political meaning/aspect of his work thusly:"

Hace dos meses, en una mesa redonda en torno a las Pinturas Aeropostales llevada a cabo en Canada se me pregunto, de un modo que denotaba una cierta urgencia, en que consistia lo politico en mi trabajo. Respondi que lo politico en mis obras residia en los pliegues de las Pinturas Aeropostales (como un polvito venenoso escondido alli).<sup>12</sup>

Dittborn's work shows a high level of creativity and cleverness. He explains the idea of making art that journeys around the world, expands on the unique use of materials and discusses inventiveness involved in the process. These connotations are the politics of his art. In other words, the wisdom of his art is involved in the process. Although he does not entirely detach himself and the meaning of his work from a political significance, he has never admitted that his

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<sup>12</sup> Cubitt, "An Airmail Interview," 92. Two months ago, in a round table conversation about the *Airmail Paintings* in Canada, someone asked me, with an urgent tone, the political content in my work. I responded that the political content resided in the folding of my paintings (like a hidden poisonous powder).

works are in fact a protest to Pinochet's dictatorship. It is important to make this point, because most of the critics who have written about Dittborn emphasize the "political meaning" of his work—a meaning that has only been designated by those who write about it, not by the artist himself. In fact, the criticism attached to his work is mostly related to the technique and the non-formal attributes, rather than the political content itself.

## CHAPTER 7 THE SUBJECT IS THE TECHNIQUE

In a country like Chile, where the institutions are not only guardians of order but also agents of destruction, it is more difficult to accept the type of art that merely gives pleasure and no longer questions its complicity with such institutions ... this art of the pleasurable fails to contest the various discourses of power.<sup>1</sup>

—Nelly Richard, *Margins and Institutions*

In this atmosphere, the idea of conceptual art enters the Chilean artistic milieu. This necessity to break the rules, to move onto something different, to express a feeling immersed in a conflictive reality are what provided the path to experiment with new techniques, new media, new format, new display, new concept, and an overall new installation.

### **The Importance of the Medium**

Rosalind Krauss, in her book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, explains the importance of the medium and the necessity to rescue formal values that have been lost in this so called “post-medium condition.”<sup>2</sup> She explains that each medium, such as painting and sculpture, has its own set of rules. By identifying that each medium has its standards, Krauss sees a clear opportunity to judge each work of art: Art is about judgment, and if the art can self-reflect in its own media, then it can preserve itself. These ideas seem easy to implement, but then the idea of conceptual art was born, with accompanying possibilities of installation art.

Installation art consisted basically of free use of any material to express an idea or to portray a concept. The birth of installation art ended the sets of rules that Krauss delineated. By not having criteria, there cannot be judgment. When artists and/or critics no longer agree on criteria by which to value art, there can no longer be any judgment as to what art has value.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard, *Margins and Institutions*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Krauss, cover page.

Krauss states: “The conventions in question need not be as strict as those of a fugue or a sonnet; they might be exceedingly loose or schematic. But without them there would be no possibility of judging the success or failure of such improvisation.”<sup>3</sup> This situation happened in Chile during the early 1990s when Dittborn was exhibiting his work. A conceptual art criterion for artistic judgment had not been created. As a result, the public and art critics were confused by the new artistic tendency, and the easiest way to react to a new form was by rejecting it.

Conceptual art reintroduced photography, because photography looks great on a piece of paper, and it can be reproduced without losing the original quality. Similar to photography is the use of language. These two “new” mediums were introduced at once by conceptual art, and many artists took advantage of this situation. They saw a window to express and to move beyond the formalistic techniques that, to them, were already boring and overused. With these new tools in mind, Dittborn applied his views into the *Airmail Paintings*.

The artist not only used and reproduced photography, but he added text and hand-drawings on top of paper or canvas. Would this fit into the idea of conceptual art? Of course, but that is problematic, because if we use Krauss’s reasoning, we cannot judge Dittborn’s art. Since nobody had agreed on what conceptual art should be, critics had no ability to measure it. Could we alter the criteria? Yes. Good critics can review and articulate their criteria, but that was not the situation in Chile during the time period when conceptual art was emerging. Although Krauss argues that “the international spread of the mixed-media installation has become ubiquitous,”<sup>4</sup> in many places—including Chile—the rise of mixed-media installations was a failure.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

According to Krauss, it is important to constantly make sense of that criterion. Otherwise, everything can be considered art, and if everything is considered art, then art disappears because it becomes everything. If we increase the parameters of what can be considered “art,” we would see as a result a decrease of art itself, and art would eventually disappear.

The ideas of rules and judgment are clear. But can we have the same mindset to discuss thoughts that deal with social issues? Dittborn’s art is composed mainly of social messages, which leads to the question: how do we combine a social meaning with a contemporary display? In this sense, Dittborn has achieved a major accomplishment. Whether or not he received recognition at the time, we can clearly see today that his *Airmail Paintings* were successful. They combine a social meaning—which was so important and characteristic of the Chilean society during the years of the dictatorship—with a contemporary display that not only was new at the time, but was also rejected by the establishment. Dittborn not only kept the social meaning of his work embedded in conceptual ideas, but he made those conceptual ideas become the subject of his process.

The reception of *Remota: Airmail Paintings* played on the old prejudices toward Latin American art as well as the new theoretical outlooks that are critical of the very notion of “Latin American art” itself. Too political for some, and not enough for those who make activism a fetish, the reactions to *Remota: Airmail Paintings* ranged from cool to warm; from detached and dismissive to engaged and conflicted, and, from bewilderment to a more serious entertaining of issues raised by the art and related to larger debates taking place in other cultural locations.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of the *Airmail Paintings* can be compared to a big puzzle in which each piece is necessary for a perfect fit. Whether or not one agrees with the concept of *Airmail Paintings*, an accurate interpretation is crucial to the basic understanding. As De los Rios explains in her essay: “His work must be read as a complex network of relations motivated by

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<sup>5</sup> Zamudio-Taylor, “Eugenio Dittborn: Remota,” 48.

the selection, manipulation and exhibition of some images disseminated through the postal service.”<sup>6</sup> If it wasn’t for the technique chosen by the artist, the *Airmail Paintings* would not have been able to reach this status. His use of materials and the choices of format allowed him to successfully communicate his/these messages. According to Grace Glueck of *The New York Times*, “The show turns out to be more about the strategy of packaging than the wizardry of art.”<sup>7</sup> Although Glueck does not seem to understand the artistic value in such production, she is right in the sense that there is a strategy involved in this process: the strategy of packaging in order to continue the journey. Although Galaz and Ivelic emphasize the political aspect of Dittborn’s work, they acknowledged that the technique used is the central development of these works: “It is precisely the condition of painting-inside-an-envelope that defines this project.”<sup>8</sup>

Conceptualism, Pop Art, installation art, and appropriation techniques did not last very long in Chile. Although they produced an artistic gap, painting became the legitimate form of artistic expression in Chile. Painting returned after 1982, although it never really disappeared, according to Galaz and Ivelic. During the 1980s, many artists who had been exiled returned to the country, bringing with them a collection of works of art—most of them paintings. According to Galaz and Ivelic, due to the loss of democracy, many artists concentrated on a more “expiatory” trend, trying to report on issues associated with that loss. The authors make an excellent point by saying that installation and other kinds of temporary art (typical of this period) were not significant—not because of the artistic product but because of a limitation on cultural projection. If a work of art did not meet the accepted aesthetic standards, then it was not

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<sup>6</sup> De los Rios, “Marks of Travel.”

<sup>7</sup> Grace Glueck, “Mailing It In: Art by Air,” *The New York Times*, 1997, Art View, 39.

<sup>8</sup> De los Rios, “Marks of Travel.”

considered “good.”<sup>9</sup> They compare the meaning and impact of Joseph Beuys, for example, whose art is showcased in important museums where its value and level of appreciation is significant. Although Dittborn has an international reputation and his works of art were—and still are—in fact exhibited in many important museums around the world, in Chile the situation was different. According to Galaz and Ivelic, Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings* created some kind of “disagreement” when exhibited, because they require from the viewer certain analytical skills: “Origina una convivencia conflictiva porque todo ese mundo de imagenes, objetos y textos exige del receptor una particular capacidad de analisis para decifrar esta singular escritura.”<sup>10</sup>

Galaz and Ivelic also mention an important issue, one that was present before the dictatorship, and remained after: the lack of connection and/or interaction of the public with art, and the lack of artistic presence in urban settings. This lack of connection, according to Galaz and Ivelic, is due to lack of education. If artistic motivation was present among the public and authorities, the current artistic interests and knowledge would have been much different.

Painting is much more popular in Chile now due to two factors. First, painting is cheap. It does not require a big budget for supplies. Every year fewer students enroll in artistic degree programs involving sculpture as an independent form of expression, because they cannot afford to buy the art supplies requested by the program. The second factor is that investors do not yet see or understand the value of sculpture or other artistic forms. Painting therefore is the most traded art investment in Chile.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Galaz and Ivelic, *Chile Arte Actual*, 173.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 325-326.

## CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

An obvious way to look at Dittborn's art is through a political lens. For many critics, the socio-political aspect is more relevant than the conceptual ideas behind the *Airmail Paintings*. This observance is understandable, since most of these critics witnessed the dictatorship and its consequences. Although many critics mentioned Dittborn's conceptual developments as part of his artistic career, none of them favors his conceptual tendencies over his political influences. In my view, this is the central problem associated with the rise of conceptual art in Chile during this period (1970s–1980s). Dittborn represented a unique opportunity to “promote” the development of conceptual art, but no one seemed interested at that time. For some critics, the political meaning of Dittborn's art was not bold enough. For others, his conceptual ideas which were embedded in allegorical messages, were too complicated and difficult to understand. As a result, the artist received mostly criticism in his own country.

The socio-political memories of the dictatorship are still latent in the minds of the people; the wounds have not yet healed. Many Chileans have not been able to reach closure because of these memories. As a result, political meaning in the eyes of many is too painful to be “played with.” As Ann Wilson Lloyd, American critic and art curator, explains in her essay titled *In Recovery* (1996), closure is so difficult because Augusto Pinochet is still—even today—a controversial figure.

Because he lived through this time, Dittborn had license to incorporate socio-political meaning into his work. As mentioned earlier, an obvious tendency occurs to leave evidence of a social situation that translates, in this case, into human suffering. Although it is not always the case, in some instances clear political evidence is portrayed through the dictatorship's victims. Although Dittborn did not exhibit his work during the dictatorship years, he became a symbol of

protest against the establishment. To analyze Dittborn's work beyond a political scope, it is crucial to understand the developments associated with the dictatorship not just as a historical-political event, but also as a socially oppressive influence. In this sense, the analysis provided by Bruner, Galaz, Ivelic, Goldman, Richard, and Zamudio, among others became essential tools that provided me with the *zeitgeist*<sup>1</sup> of the era.

It is apparent in the course of Dittborn's artistic development to show the ways in which he expressed his opposition. Early signs of conceptual influences started to emerge, inspiring Dittborn's development. His representation of subject matter through the use of allegorical tools and the employment of techniques opposed to painting were his way to concisely contest the government and therefore the artistic establishment.

It is not clear whether or not Dittborn's use of allegories was meant merely to hide a political purpose, but he used allegories that provided him with through which to channel his political ideology. At this point, it is not necessary to know if he intended to openly protest against the government and use allegories as a vehicle. It is important, however, to understand that he used one aspect of the human condition--human desolation--to represent various groups of people in need. In this sense, the allegorical component of Dittborn's work represents an aid to a social situation that affected not only the victims of the dictatorship, but victims of human tragedy elsewhere. Owens' analysis became a crucial source of information that allowed me to visualize the conceptual aspect of Dittborn's work.

The idea of interpreting the *Airmail Paintings*' technique as the subject of his work became much clearer after reading Krauss's reflection on the medium and its importance. She says that the medium is not just the material used to produce art, but it is about the relationship that this

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<sup>1</sup> The feeling of the era.

medium has with the external world. It is a concept way beyond the material itself: “A medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as a subject, will be a wholly ‘specific’ to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity.”<sup>2</sup> The work of Dittborn translates into Krauss’s words in the sense that the technique employed became the support that the *Airmail Paintings*’ concept needed. The main purpose of the *Airmail Paintings*, according to Dittborn, is that they are meant to travel. With this idea in mind, the medium becomes very specific, as Krauss thus explains. In addition, she emphasizes the need for the artist to “explain” why he makes certain decisions. In Dittborn’s case, the artist not only clearly explains the motives behind his technique, but he also takes the time to clarify the misunderstandings associated with his art, favoring the use of materials and disseminating method as the core of his artistic expression. In Krauss’s views, this explanation becomes a crucial and much needed action from the artist—any artist.

Another important aspect of the medium is the idea that it can be used not only to produce something physically, but also to produce new thoughts. Krauss explains: “What is at issue in the context of a medium, however, is not just this possibility of exploiting the fictional to unmask reality’s lies, but of producing an analysis of fiction itself in relation to a specific structure of experience.”<sup>3</sup> With this idea in mind, we can conclude that Dittborn’s work successfully uses the medium in order to produce a bridge between fiction and reality. By using imagery from the past in order to represent human suffering in the present, he is telling a story that relates to certain human experiences. He has made the medium the center of attention in his artistic development, regardless of its political content.

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<sup>2</sup> Krauss, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss, 47.

Today, most Chileans accept conceptual art. Some museums devote their space solely to conceptual art, and some art galleries provide small spaces for solo exhibitions. According to Wilson Lloyd, artists in Chile can be safely divided into two groups: the older artists who were producing art before the dictatorship, and younger artists who were trained during the dictatorship. Older artists have a tendency to incorporate political thought into their work, but unlike during the dictatorship years, now they can do it safely without the fear of repression. Rather than concentrating on political representations, the younger artists are more focused on representing local and personal experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Dittborn belongs to the group of older artists who have not abandoned political implications in their work. However, the importance of his work resides in his technique. He is still working on the development of new *Airmail Paintings*, and using the national and international postal service as the vehicle of his unique idea. This concept reflects Dittborn's significance in contemporary art. His international reputation has allowed him to exhibit his *Airmail Paintings* in Australia, Europe, and the United States. In the United States, his paintings are administered by and have been exhibited by the *Alexander and Bonin* art gallery in New York.

Even though the *Airmail Paintings* were not appreciated during the period when they were first exhibited in Chile (1990), today they represent an important development of conceptual art in Chile during the 1970s and 1980s. Interpretation of meaning based solely on political evidence interfered with its meaning at the time. However, although political background information is crucial to the understanding of these paintings, meaning provided by medium and disseminating method is what constitutes the core of the *Airmail Paintings*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Wilson Lloyd, "In Recovery," *Art in America* 84 no. 10 (Oct 1996): 56.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claudia A. Grant was born in Santiago, Chile, where she lived until 1999. In March of that year, she came to the United States to study English and to pursue a career in the artistic world doing web design. While in this country, she met her future husband, Nye Grant. They have been married for eight years.

Claudia attended the University of Central Florida, receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in art history in 2004. She then entered the University of Florida's graduate program in art history and will receive her master's degree in art history in August 2008.

Claudia hopes to combine her skills in web design with her knowledge in art history to create online exhibitions and make art more accessible to others.