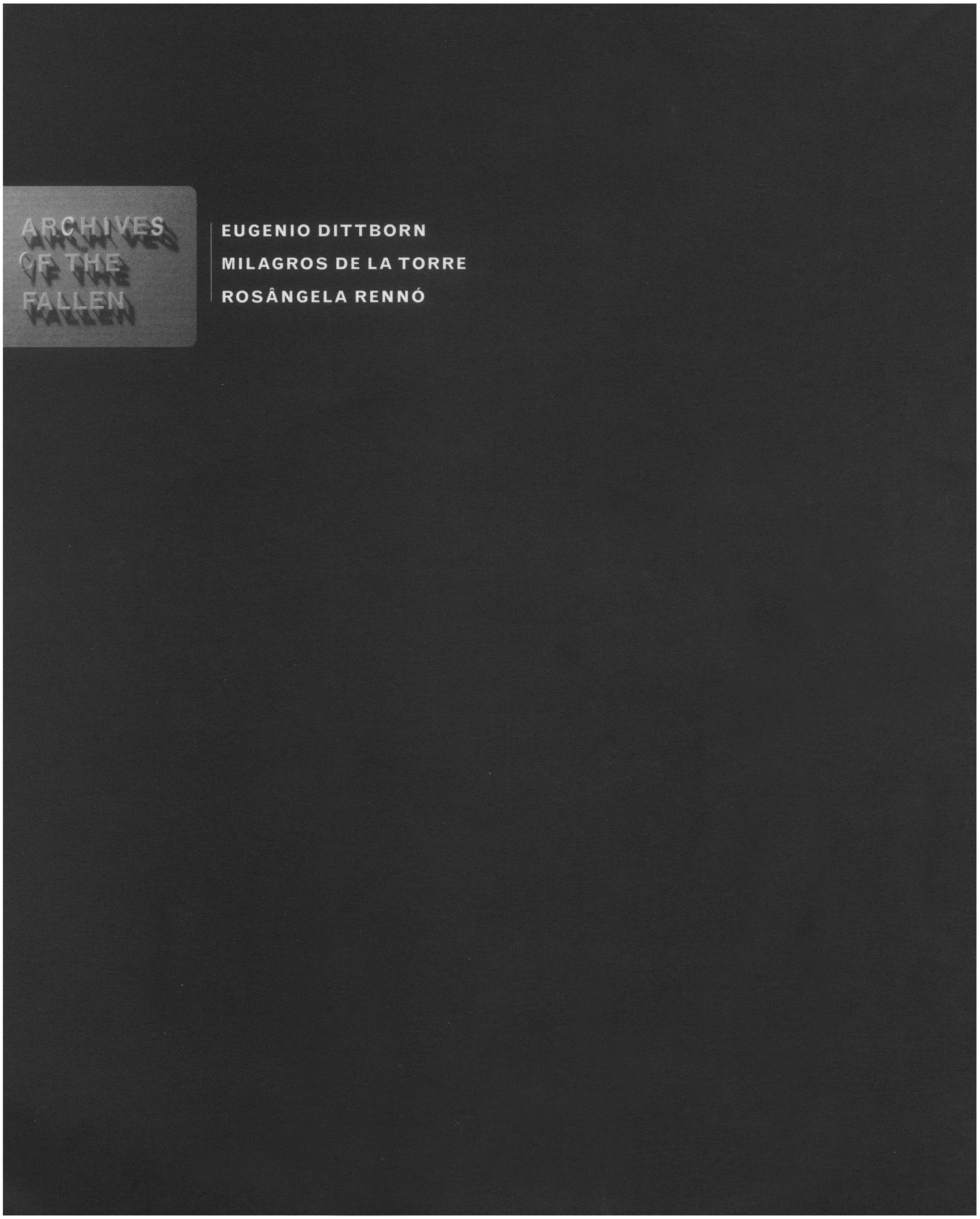
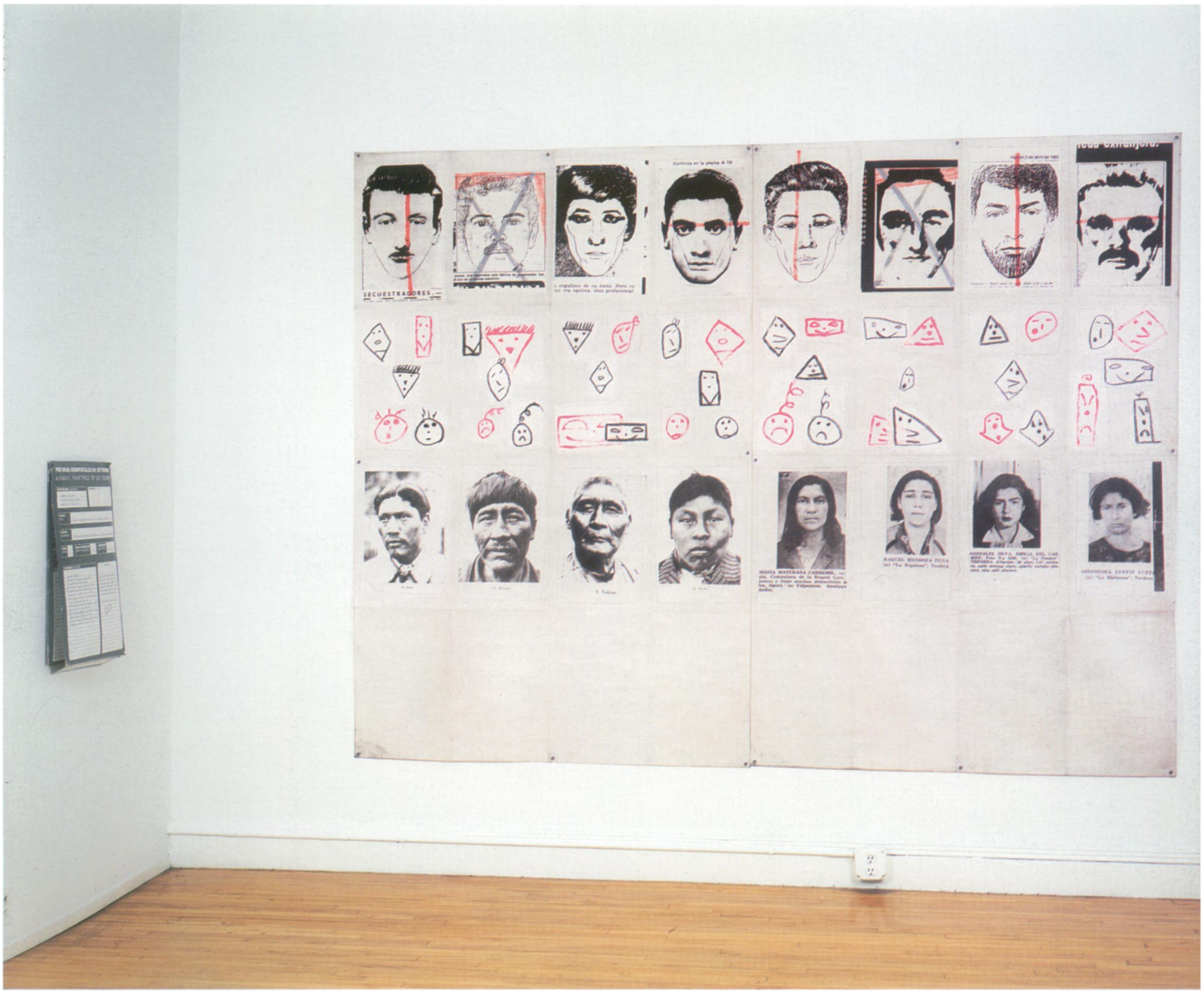


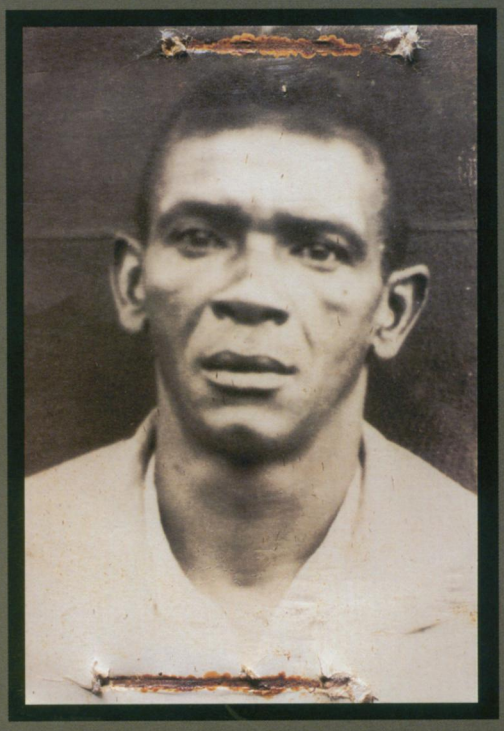
EUGENIO **DITTBORN**

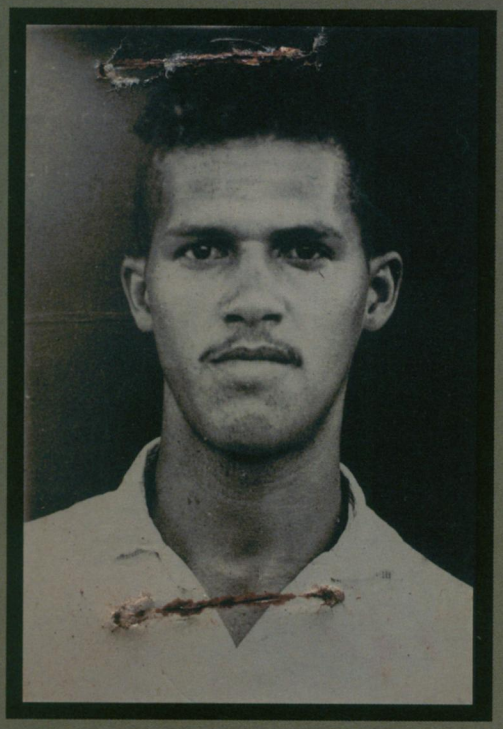


Eugenio Dittborn, *Airmail Painting No. 78, The 7th History of the Human Face (The Scenery of the Sky)*, 1990.

[ABOVE]
Eugenio Dittborn, *Airmail Painting No. 05, To Hang*, 1984.

[RIGHT]
Eugenio Dittborn, *Airmail Painting No. 15, Shadows, Nothing*, 1984.





Rosângela Rennó, from *Imemorial*, 1994.

MILAGROS **DE LA TORRE**

Knife fabricated from prison bed frame.

Shirt of journalist murdered in the massacre of Ucchuraccay, Ayacucho.

All images from Milagros de la Torre, *Los pasos perdidos (The Lost Steps)*, Lima, Peru, 1996.

Skirt worn by Marita Alpaca when she was pushed by her lover from the eighth floor of the Sheraton Hotel in Lima. In the autopsy, she was found to be pregnant.

Belts used by psychologist Mario Poggi to strangle a rapist during police interrogation.

MILAGROS DE LA TORRE

from *Bajo el sol negro (Under the Black Sun)*, Cuzco, Peru, 1991–93.

This project was inspired by the low-cost, rudimentary techniques of Peruvian street photographers, who often apply Mercurochrome to paper negatives in order to lighten (and thus render more 'racially acceptable') the skin tones of their subjects.

The historian Pierre Nora has written that "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image." Photography is critical to the practice and authority of the archive, insofar as it folds together history as representation and representation as history. Transferring the world to image, photography as a representational structure produces a certain archival *effect*. And, like photography, the archive gains its authority to represent the past through an apparent neutrality, whereby difference is either erased or regulated. Both the archive and photography reproduce the world as witness to itself, a testimony to the real, historical evidence.

Eugenio Dittborn of Chile, Rosângela Rennó of Brazil, and Milagros de la Torre of Peru have all worked with the concept of the archive. Through their work, they seek to rezone the cartography of memory and to restore a past that has been erased from the historical record. While Dittborn's work dates from the 1970s through the period of Pinochet's dictatorship, the work of both Rennó and de la Torre began in the murky wake of a period of state and civil violence. They use photography precisely to destabilize its authority as a technology of remembrance, a technology that participates in constructing seamless narratives of identity. Each of these artists works with the notion of the unsanctioned or unlawful body of the nation as a way to address the violence that characterizes the inscription of history. They use photographs that represent the moments before which the body becomes absent. In so doing, they question how and what it is that photography remembers and forgets and for whom and what purpose.

Eugenio Dittborn, *Airmail Painting No. 95, The 13th History of the Human Face (the Portals of H.)* (detail), 1991.

Since the late 1970s, Dittborn's project has been to return to circulation the marginalized and erased figures of Chilean history. His work points to the the archive as a container that preserves but, at the same time, buries the subject. In his extensive series of *Airmail Paintings*, Dittborn has brought together anthropologist Martín Gusinde's 1920 photographs of indigenous peoples of the Tierra del Fuego, who, after a long history of extermination, were on the point of disappearance; ID photographs of petty thieves and prostitutes taken from police files and published in cheap detective magazines of the 1940s and 1950s; identikit pictures; images of

archaeological remains; and drawings of faces made by Dittborn's younger daughter. This work of exhumation recovers the body of Chilean memory and history and places it back into circulation. Folded and transported to new points of destination, the unfolding of these figures makes them visible and combats the oblivion to which they had been consigned.

As it exposes us to those whom the government had defined as transgressive, criminal, or primitive, this work fractures the seamless and monumental history of the nation. It becomes an allegory of life under the dictatorship of Pinochet, a regime that committed violence against its people in the name of the nation and national identity.

Rosângela Rennó, from *Imemorial*, 1994.

In her series *Imemorial* (1994), Rosângela Rennó showed an installation of fifty photographs that yield dark portraits of the workers and children who built Brasilia, the capital whose architectural design was championed for its utopian vision. In a warehouse of the Public Archive of the Federal District, Rennó found suitcases of more than 15,000 files concerning the employees of the government construction company Novacap. In *Imemorial*, she used stories that told of a massacre in the workers' barracks and of dozens of workers who had died in the building of Brasilia and been buried in the foundations. In the archives, these workers were classified under the heading "dismissed due to death."

An example of Walter Benjamin's warning that not even the dead are safe when only the victors tell the story, Rennó's work engages in a struggle over the ownership of memory. The experience of seeing is itself subject to the forces of forgetting, and the labor of reading traces is equivalent to coming to terms with the past. Traces of identity are captured in the moment prior to the subjects' disappearance, a recognition of difference brought out of the shadows of a suppressed history. The installation represents a redemptive gesture, a resurrection of fallen bodies, those sacrificed in the building of the future.

Milagros de la Torre, *Police identification mask of criminal known as "Loco Perochena"*, from *Los pasos perdidos (The Lost Steps)*, Lima, Peru, 1996.

In 1996, Milagros de la Torre produced a series of fifteen photographs of objects taken in the archive of *cuerpos del delitos* at the Palace of Justice in Lima. The title of the series, *The Lost Steps*,

refers to the name given to a hallway in the Palacio de Justicia through which detainees pass on their way to receiving their condemnation. Under the guidance of long-term archivist Manuel Guzman, de la Torre was led through the mountains of files, boxes, and evidence hidden away in the recesses of the Palace. The objects she photographed are the evidence of crimes committed, the remaining traces of tragic stories of passions, beliefs, and illusions gone awry.

There is no bright light of revelation given to these objects. Rather, they are seen in an obscure or uncertain light. Death haunts the photographs. They are witness to what is absent from the scene. The strange illumination de la Torre gives to her photographs—as if they are lit by the darkness that has befallen them—represents the objects' entombment in the archives and a memory that, swiftly buried, lies deep within the shadows of history. One may propose that the effect of de la Torre's work in the archive today functions in part allegorically. It suggests something that has passed, but which, by being brought back into the present as the image of a ruinous history, becomes emblematic of the fate of things to come.

In the wake of a long period of violence and unrest, the concepts of identity, freedom, and justice, as defined by government, have become a guide to measuring the possibility of democracy. Their artistic expression represents an intervention in the archives of a nation. As these images bring identities into the light and expose us to the stories they embody, they are mute witness to the fate of the individuals who, by entering the public record, have been written out of history. At a time when histories of identity and nation are being rewritten, these images are a timely reminder of the instrumental power of state institutions to control, if not determine, the lives of its populace. The photographs become a memorial, a site where memory and forgetfulness can face each other.