It seems like an innocent enough question to pose to an artist: *Where do you come from?* On the most literal level, it asks: *Where is your home?* Yet several charged assumptions lurk under surface of this simple query. For one thing, it presumes that the answer is a variant of “not from around here,” and that such an “elsewhere” is stable and singular. Moreover, it insists: *what is your position?* That is, where do you locate yourself — aesthetically, ideologically, politically?

For Cristóbal Lehyt, a Chilean artist who has lived in New York for the past decade, there are no easy answers. In his multi-disciplinary projects (which integrate photography, installation, sculpture, drawing, and video), he turns such questions back to the viewer, interrogating their underlying stakes rather than providing any definitive replies. Lehyt traffics in the mistranslations that occur when stereotypes about “place” collide with local, material circumstances. Much of his work is site specific, in that it is frequently made in dialogue — albeit a frustrated or dissonant dialogue — with the locations and art institutions in which he exhibits; his solo show *Dramaprojektion* at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart is one example of this mode of production. In fact, Lehyt’s method might best be termed dissociative, in that
he puts pressure on depersonalization and fragmentation, or, as Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño put it, “a momentary disconnection from a certain kind of reality.”

The Künstlerhaus project consists of several inter-related elements which together function like a flexible, warped mirror in which the artist reveals a complicated vision of “home” (Chile) while also reflecting back his projected, somewhat made-up sense of Germany. With these elements — twelve large-scale images from his ongoing series El Norte, ten drawn “portraits” of people he encountered in Stuttgart, an abstracted, sculptural surrogate of the city set inside a large container, and his short video No—he explores the psychic and political complexities of itinerancy. If some versions of site specificity have come under fire for their assumptions about the artist being granted special, transparent access to a totalized “community,” Lehyt’s work, by contrast, pivots on the unknowability of the contexts in which he is working: how little he understands about the place he finds himself, how much he relies on pre-formed ideas—and, conversely, how viewers might bring to the show their own received knowledge about him as a Latin American artist.

The version of El Norte on view in Stuttgart is made specifically for US and European audiences; it is not meant to be exhibited in Latin America. (Other works, such as a video installation project for Galería Metropolitana in his hometown Santiago, was made exclusively for a Chilean space.) These twelve images — which, when the series is complete, will ultimately number one hundred — are obliquely related to the mythic Atacama desert in northern Chile, a place where it has famously never rained that is known for its historical ruins and its moon-like surface. Some of the panels are enlarged photographs taken by Lehyt, while others are appropriated from a range of sources — including newspapers, websites, videos, and posters — and then duplicated by Lehyt using photography, painting, and drawing. Blown up to roughly approximate human scale (64 x 42 inches), many have been rotated from their horizontal frame to the vertical axis, so that spectators must physically re-orient their perspective to view them.

El Norte contains both clichéd views of the north, like a postcard-perfect arid landscape, and scenes more difficult to locate, such as an empty theater, its red curtains drawn and its stage empty, waiting for an unspecified drama to unfold. Others pointedly refer to the north’s role in geopolitical battles—an image of the Peruvian nationalist Antauro Humala, for instance, and a distorted painting that refers to the historic border conflict between Peru and Chile. An archaeological capital as well as the locus of Chile’s contested fortune — its copper mines — the north has served not only a source of regional pride, but a resource to be plundered.

These legacies are alluded to in Lehyt’s series; two images show vitrines holding skulls and mummies from the anthropo-
logical museum in San Pedro de Atacama. Lehyt introduces several levels of mediation here: they are photographs of stills from a video the artist took at the museum. What is more, the female mummy that is seen in profile, her long dark hair hanging down over her bony frame, is in fact a replica, a facsimile created for display purposes. By defamiliarizing these icons of Chilean heritage, Lehyt’s *El Norte* unsettles ideas of cultural “authenticity.” Instead of an authoritative archive, he widens the gap between the images he selects and the place they claim to represent. The series also destabilizes the truth-claims of indexical technologies, dissociating the photographic image from its presumed referent—one image of what looks like ancient remains in the desert are actually structures from the recent past, for instance. Another image appears to be a woman at a political protest, her fist raised in a gesture of defiance. But in fact, she is dancing through the streets as part of a religious festival in the northern Chilean city La Tirana—here aetsk a version of the foreign “elsewhere” meets a repeated, and somewhat banalized, emblem of political resistance. Taken together, the images allude to a specific site, but this site is never coherently mapped, and instead they present an opaque, ambiguous version of Lehyt’s “origins.” The friction between readability and estrangement that Lehyt sets up is akin to Bertolt Brecht’s notion of alienation. But his self-conscious understanding of his own “alien” status re-focuses this alienation through Homi Bhabha’s optic of exilic dislocation.*

*El Norte* makes reference to a vast repertoire of images that have become over-determined in Chile by a childhood education that used the desert to forge a patriotic sense of collective identity, and saturated by the tourist industry. (This is one reason they are un-seeable there—literally so because of Lehyt’s choice to never display them in Latin America, but also clouded by these layers of over-exposure and repetition.) Readings of this incomplete archive is partially localized—in Germany, for viewers unfamiliar with this terrain, the images become intentionally challenging, and viewers must project their own sense of coherence onto them and create their own narratives. Though the sequence implies a kind of travelogue, there are no overarching aesthetic devices to connect one image to another—some are straightforward documentary shots, some are heavily manipulated—so this sense of narrative is thwarted.

In the absence of such a story, one route to understand *El Norte* might be through reference to contemporary art history, such as the conceptual photography of Gabriel Orozco or Carrie Mae Weems’s *The Hampton Project*, an installation that also confronts how photography shapes historical memories of place. Yet as much as Lehyt’s work invites comparisons to previous models, his far-ranging, and sometimes surprising, list of artistic touchstones (Sol LeWitt, Joan Miró, Marcel Broodthaers) points to the peril of mechanistically charting influences.

Lehyt, born six weeks after the violent coup against Salvador Allende in 1973, can also be positioned in the wake of the Chilean *escena avanizada* (the avant-garde scene active during the repressive Pinochet era), not least because of his sharpened awareness of the politics of institutionality and his interest in the recirculation of information. While he does acknowledge the generational legacy of groups and figures such as CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte), Loty Rottenfeld, and Eugenio Dittborn, he is also skeptical of how those critical art practices are now heroized and whose theoretical frameworks have become somewhat ossified. As he has stated, “As a Chilean artist I see myself as an ‘heir’ to this tradition, and— as such— I have the freedom to take it and leave it whenever I wish, and at whatever times seem appropriate to me.”

While Lehyt’s art is inflected with the history of post-1973 Chile, it is equally concerned with the unstable, recursive nature of that history and its disavowal. His short video *NO* (2005), for instance—another work made in the north of Chile—is an investigation of a crumbled, abandoned building on which the word *NO* has been scrawled. Filmed with a shaky, hand-held camera as the artist runs through around this apocalyptic setting, the video conveys a sense of catastrophe. Though a grafted *NO* in the desert perhaps refers to the campaign against Pinochet (and to the word’s crucial role for the Chilean *avanizada*—it was a signature feature of the street works of CADA, who used the word extensively in its protest murals), it is also an open signifier, alluding to the current Iraq war. As much as the *NO* on a decaying wall verges on illegibility and erasure, the video is also a meditation on the compulsive return of history, its stubborn persistence in the present. In such pieces, Lehyt approaches the past from a slight remove, dissociatively.

In psychoanalytic terms, dissociation is a response to trauma. Trauma, of course, need not be individualized, and can include national ruptures and collective shock. Art critic Nelly Richard has referred to a “crisis of language” in the aftermath of the 1973 coup, namely the disjuncture between the official “truth” muffled by Pinochet’s regime and its contrast to lived experience. She posits that this crisis gave rise to a Chilean art production of fragmentation and slippage distinct from US and European brands of postmodernism (whose use of appropriation, with its free, casual borrowing from all manner of sources, is viewed by Richard as emblematic of a certain privilege).

In this vein, Lehyt, somewhat estranged from both U.S. center and Latin American periphery, cautiously recycles images, and presents situations that are porous, open-ended, and vulnerable to misreadings. Such misreadings are multi-directional—his work courts productive misunderstanding by viewers as much as it is generated from his own misrecognitions of just who those phantom viewers might be. This is made evident in the works the artist made while in residence in Stuttgart,
including his drawings based on people he encountered on the street during his time in Germany. Part of his ongoing “Drama Projections”—rapidly done drawings, in the words of the artist, “as if he were someone else”—these “portraits” are not faithful, recognizable transcriptions. Instead, they are invented renderings as he imagines what the figures might be thinking as he passes them—a projection that is compounded as he draws from the disconnected space of being “someone else.” As such, though the “Drama Projections” are produced in response to the local landscape, they are based on fleeting interactions and remain somewhat hermetic and internal. The drawings point to a tension inherent in the Künstlerhaus works, which is Lehyt’s self-awareness that, as an artist-in-residence, he is meant to engage with his host city, while acknowledging how superficial that engagement often remains.

Previous “Drama Projections” have been disturbing, violent, and sexual. They can also be darkly humorous. Corporeal and grotesque, they depict creatures feeding on each other’s heads, a woman fisting another woman in the mouth, bodies embedded in other bodies—the pleasures and pains of consumption, desire, and merging. Some have the feel of an exorcism, as if the artist were working through or purging the lingering afterimages of an upbringing indelibly marked by Catholicism, with its fascination with wounded and crucified forms.

The drawings done in Germany tread on similar ground, but many of the figures are more bleakly isolated than in past iterations—their faces turn away from each other; their limbs are amputated or fold up uselessly into their torsos; they stare out blankly at the viewer. Lehyt’s sure line deftly registers their interior, solitary tragedies as they float alone on their white ground. Several of the Stuttgart “Drama Projections,” however, graphically depict interpersonal violation: in one, a man carries a severed head in one hand, nonchalantly, as if it were a bag of groceries. In another, a monstrous figure stuffs his whole fist into another’s mouth.

Drawing, with its fetishized touch of the hand, is often considered a medium with direct access to the artist’s subjectivity. This is especially true of the automatic writing of Surrealists such as André Breton, who promoted it as a tool to plumb the unconscious. Lehyt undercuts this in his imagined portraits, using the loss of conscious control in his drawings as a device of displacement. A further level of distance is introduced when each “Drama Projection” is photocopied, enlarged, and reassembled in a series of panels. The resultant images, whose gridded surfaces echo Dittborn’s “Airmail Paintings,” use a reproductive technology (the xerox machine) to emphasize Lehyt’s mechanistic method. And, following LeWitt, past drawings of Lehyt’s have been penned directly on the walls by museum staff. Far from autobiographical traces of the author or uncanny resemblances of the subject, they are depersonalized, anonymous “portraits” of fictitious characters, and as they undergo multiple layers of transformation, they become allegories for the interferences that are integral to the process of translation itself.

The questions of mediation in El Norte and the drama projections are elaborated upon in the sculptural element of the Künstlerhaus show. For this installation, a large wooden container—surrounded on all sides with the enlarged “Drama Projections”—is filled with a series of over two thousand sculptures made during Lehyt’s time in Germany, based on debris he found when walking the streets of Stuttgart. Though the quickly made forms are imperfect and naïve, in their sheer volume they have a cumulative force, massing together to create an impressively dense topography. Most of the blocks and blobs appear architectural (clustered houses, rows of buildings, wobbly towers), but some resemble primitive vessels or ritual artifacts. Placed in a loose, geometric pattern that references a city plan, these obsessively made artifacts are bathed in red light, as if [like a photograph] they are in the process of being developed.

This miniaturized cityscape, which, though abstracted and incomplete, does include a few recognizable features of Stuttgart, such as the central train station, is seen only from a small square window cut into one side of the container, as viewers become voyeurs, bending over slightly to witness this scene at a distance. Such a keyhole technique brings to mind Marcel Duchamp’s Étant Donnés, but Lehyt’s interior, aside from the suggestive red light, is far less lurid than Duchamp’s splayed, naked female. Instead, it evokes a series of aeronautical views, tourist vistas, and rational urban planning—even as the amulet-like, compulsively repeated sculptures bleed into the realm of the irrational. The small objects, which are aligned on a ground of dark cloth, also conjure items for sale by street vendors carefully laid out on sheets. By making a quasi-monumental work from low, scavenged sources (plaster, newspaper, and miscellaneous trash), Lehyt satirically refers to the prototypical nomadic artist, inspired by the detritus of his wanderings. His pointed dissociation from his foreign surroundings is allegorized in the very medium of plaster-soaked newspapers and garbage—he utilizes the region’s daily chronicle only to obliterate it.

Over the past few decades, artists as international travelers have become popular figures within the global art market; they are frequently expected to parachute in and provide the service of shedding new light on a local context. With his Stuttgart project, Lehty refuses this role, and instead opts to relate to the city through a lens of projective identifications and preconceived notions. He also self-reflexively articulates his own originary “site” as a series of negations and contradictions (in El Norte, an exoticized Chile is made unrecognizable or ordinary). In this, he creates a complex double portrait of Chile and Germany as each are refracted through the force of stereotype. Yet he also suggests a relationship or rough analogy between Chile and...
Germany, as both negotiate their recent authoritarian pasts. These are parallax states ("state" carries the double meaning of "affective condition" and "nation") as they differently grapple with the burden of fascist histories. The red, lab-like light of Lehyt’s model city is instructive: it is the color of emergency.

To term Lehyt’s practice dissociative is not to diagnose or pathologize him. Dissociation in this instance is not a symptom nor an illness, but a strategic response, a tactical operation. His work does not present a seamless, totaling narrative but is staged as a series of slippages (e.g. dancers that look like protesters, portraits that are invented, cityscapes that are recreated). These interruptions are related to specific conditions of marginality and global imbalances of power — to quote Walter Benjamin, “the history of the oppressed is a discontinuum.”

Where do you come from? One provisional answer is provided by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra: “imaginary worlds/ in imaginary places and times.” The potential of the imaginary is that, because it is disconnected from deadening “reality,” it can be all the more vital, all the more potent in its capacity for criticality. Lehyt’s imaginary worlds are not fantastical, but zones of projection, complete with fissures and fragments — Parra’s “unmendable imaginary cracks.” To imagine such a place is to recognize that sites of origin, exile, and travel are all subject to deformation and partial invention. By creating situations that are not overly invested in authenticity or the literal, and that insist on the sharpened stakes of art making, Lehyt’s art generates its own urgent fictions.

8 Walter Benjamin, notes to “ÜBER DEN Begriff der GESCHICHTE”, Gessamten Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974): V 1236.