Espace Sculpture

Hanne Darboven

Writing time

John K. Grande

Concours ESPACE/CRTIQUE
Numéro 17, automne 1991

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/944ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Citer cet article
Hanne Darboven

Writing Time

John K. Grande
and accompanied by music composed by Darboven and Friedrich Stoppa, this exhibition does not immediately shock but steadily progresses to give a feeling of claustrophobia, of being overwhelmed, oppressed by a history that is more tardy, less heroic than the one we would like to believe in. Being a very real condensation of the daily routines and de rigueur monotony of Darboven's daily transcriptions, it becomes an epic work of minimalist biography. The compaction of trivial data into serials orders has a Proustian flair that makes each of these pages of chosen memory material and information seem to erase the very traces of the past from which they originated. The calendar is merely a working tool. Marcel Proust's comment that the past is «somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is.» As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die, or whether we never encounter it. could as easily be applied to the present and future in Darboven's ontological hotel for the mind.

Acting as her own curator, Hanne Darboven has had the actual installation space adapted to her personal system. Her personal system is not simply a serial mystery, a philosphic enquiry into the ontology of beingness. Like a human machine she uses a method of adding dates to arrive at other opposite numbers, (for example 23/9/89 becomes 23 + 9 = 32 + 9 = 49). Personal jottings written in German are included, then separated from the typeset contextual text by the word Gedankenstrich(e) or dashes. These constructed pages have their leftover spaces filled with daily writing, a nonsensical script that resembles the action of written script without alphabetical signifiers. Darboven's attack is on the near religious, habitual association we have with letters, scripts and word form. Her form of art was so dense that the critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler then stated they, «saturate their outwardly sane and didactic premises with a poetic and condensatory intensity that almost amounts to insanity.» Throughout the 60's Darboven's art was grouped with that of the conceptualists as it exemplified its more human characteristics, passing effortlessly from the intellectual to the sensual. Sol Lewitt became her friend and minimalist mentor during this period. His now famous essay Paragraphs on Conceptual Art appearing in the summer 1967 issue of Artforum, clearly expressed his vanguard views on conceptualism: «In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work... The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it
is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."² Carl Andre's vision of art, summed up by his comment that, «A man climbs a mountain because it is there; a man makes a work of art because it is not there»³, was also influential to Darboven's search. At one point, exhausted from doing her notations she even hand copied 500 pages of Homer's The Odyssey, in the same scale as the paper back book she was working from.

Hanne Darboven's present show arrives at an uncertain moment in the world's future, one in which no hermetic codes seem to work any more. Like a bereft legacy arriving to haunt us after the demise of its equally bereft successor -post-modernism- or a daunting tribute to one of the most tenacious followers of conceptualism, it all now seems almost an antiquated notion. Mario Perniola, an Italian esthetician who teaches at the University of Rome writes, «Conceptual art was the end point of a trend that had been operative for some time: the loss of the object, the annulment of sensual perception, the reduction to a minimal essence, are all rooted in Romanticism. I say “end point”: there has, of course been art since Conceptual Art. But the movements that have followed it -appropriation, for example- have remained in the territory of meta-art. In fact, they merely confirm art’s narcissistic tendency to close itself off to whatever lies outside it.»⁶

As we spend time looking at the works in this show, we recognize an artist whose very iconoclasm assaults our notions of standard time, embodies Marshall McLuhan's description of typographical man, and takes a playful backward glance at Marcel Duchamp's Three Standard Stoppages. These ideas and words are visual symbols in a material cosmology and not expressions of a higher philosophical ethos.

We all repress or are repressed by doubts about our place in the universe. Much of this has to do with our private notions of what time is. For us it can be little more than a brief stopping place, the rest we leave behind not as ashes but as material we have lost. Darboven, instead, includes all, and it reverses the process. This makes her art less one that imparts historic information, instead one that describes a human dimension in an astonishingly impersonal way. As such it is a continuation of a process attitude to art, one that denies the material's metaphysical potential and leaves only the art in it. It is her personal system, one that seeks to employ what Robert Morris once called «controlled chance... to remove taste and the personal touch by co-opting forces, images, processes, to replace a step formerly taken in a directing or deciding way by the artist.»⁷

In an era when we no longer are sure exactly what inspiration really is, we must question what a response to art really is. Traditionally, when inspired by a work of art, we had a feeling of empowerment, of a manipulative control of our senses. Inspiration suggested a kind of quantum leap of faith as to what we were experiencing instead of a gradual, slow moving transformation from the normal to a more holistic state. Nietzsche's definition of inspiration, which he described after writing Thus Spake Zarathustra, that «The notion of revelation describes the condition quite simply; by which I mean that something profoundly convulsive and disturbing suddenly becomes visible and audible with indescribable definiteness and exactness. One hears -one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives: a thought suddenly flashes up like lightning, inevitably without hesitation»⁸ seems the very basis of our old dualistic vision of what art and our world once were. It was this notion of good and evil, and right and wrong, imbued with hierarchical religious and political overtones that formed the basis of the world we now seem to be leaving behind. The need for art to explain an idea no longer has the same relevance as it once did. Likewise, Joseph Beuys' vision of, «the threshold between the traditional concept of art, the end of modernism, the end of all traditions, and the anthropological concept of art, the expanded concept of art, social art as the precondition for all capability»⁹ itself now seems redundant. Our future vision of art has surpassed any ideological, anthropological or social definitions. An entirely new basis for expression must be found. Its meaning will be defined by the material and physical limits of life itself.

Hanne Darboven's work becomes one of the way stations, a guiding moment out of this world of the past, of a past view of art. Her art is an extemporal timepiece that embodies the ideological spirit of conceptualism. In some future age we will be able to think of her art, standing outside all these current developments, like a knowing witness, who sees the beginning before the end, the end before the beginning, and plays with time.¹⁰

---

10. Concurrent with this exhibition Rizzoli International Publications is releasing a limited edition facsimile reproduction in book form of an original artist's project by Hanne Darboven titled Uzzeli/Uhrzeit. Each of the 250 copies is signed by the artist on the title page, which also contains an original drawing by Darboven. Price $1500. U.S. This will be the first in a series of artist's book projects conceived by Gino van Bruggen. Other artists who will create original projects for the series include: John Baldessari, Elsworth Kelly, Sol Lewitt, Claes Oldenburg, Dorothea Rockburne, Edward Ruscha and Cindy Sherman.