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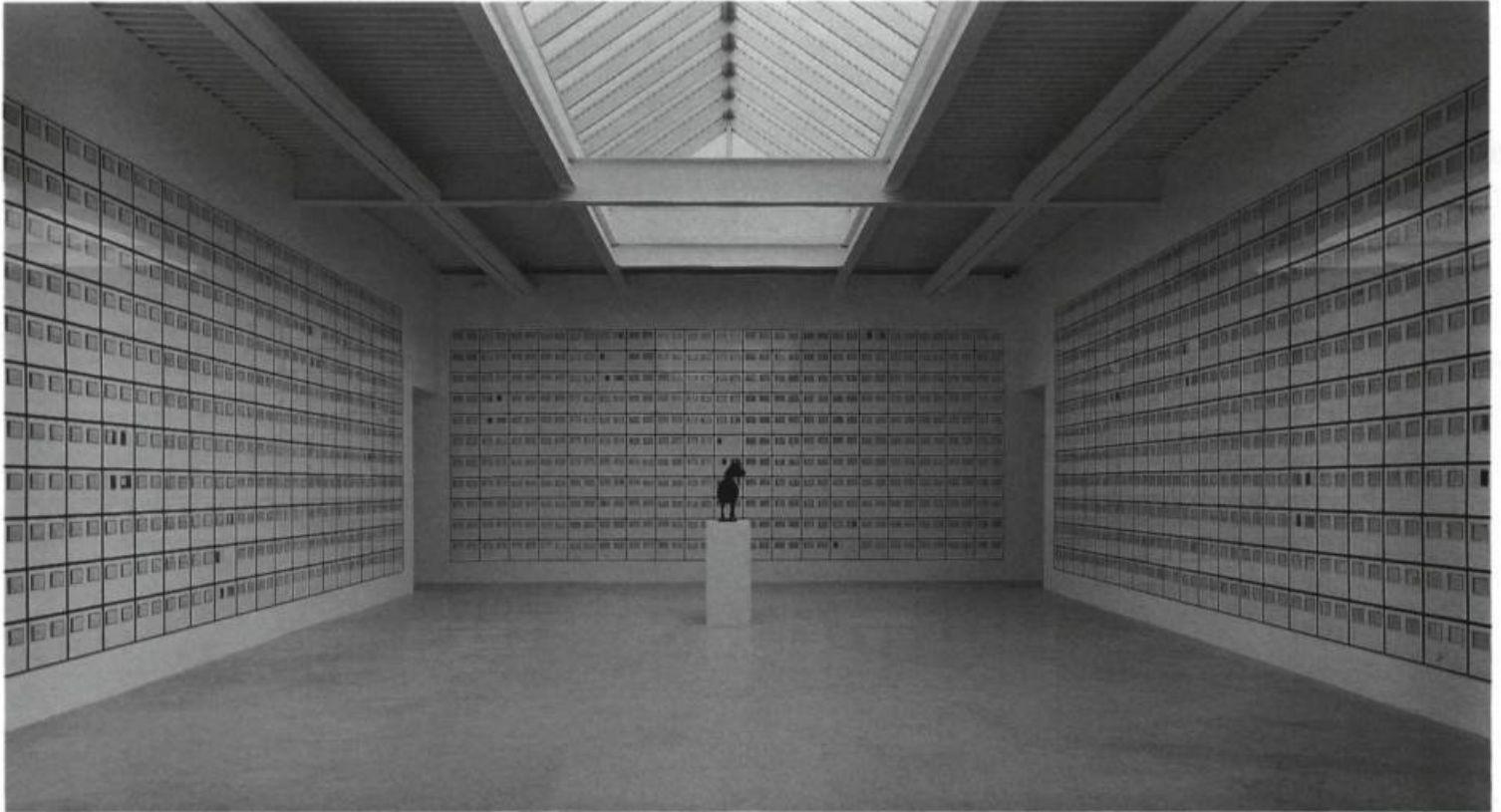
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# Hanne Darboven

## *Writing Time*

John K. Grande



Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation,  
May 18 - June 13, 1991

Hanne Darboven's current show at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto, her largest ever in North America, seems curiously out of time with our times. Her art is based on recording notes and compiling ephemera on a day-to-day basis over decades. She uses diaries and year books as the forum for her work to produce page upon page of highly detailed notations in her own handwriting that use numerical codings, «because they are so steady, limited, artificial. The only thing that has ever been created is the number.»<sup>1</sup>

The hundreds of framed pages from Darboven's diaries that we see on view, many of which have her address and phone number at the top of their pages, leave us looking at their subjects only to find they are ontological objects. Yet Darboven's method, her personal system is not simply a serial mystery, a philosophic 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 + 8 + 9 = 49). Personal jottings written in German are included, then separated from the typeset contextual text by the word *Gedankenstrich(e)* or dash(es). 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 numbers. The language of script becomes a paraphrase for the language of art. Like religion, it has its own formalities, hierarchies and symbolic associations. She states, «I write and don't describe and I do like to write and don't like to read.»<sup>2</sup>

Comprising 11 installations (one of which will be shown in 1992)

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Hanne Darboven, *Existenz*, 1989. 2, 261 sheets. Ink and photographs on paper. 29,7 x 21 cm each. Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation. Photo: Robert Keziere.

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Hanne Darboven, *Quartett 88*, 1988. 745 sheets. Ink, photographs, offset lithography. 42 x 29,7 cm each. Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation. Photo: Robert Keziere.

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 tawdry, 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 compacting of trivial data into serial 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»<sup>3</sup> 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 explicit instructions, with doors being removed, awnings being placed over skylights to alter the light and space of the Hendeles Foundation. *Requiem für Mr. Oppenheimer* (1985) which was exhibited at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1990, the first work one encounters on entering the exhibition, has an assemblage of musical instruments placed on a pedestal in its centre: a piano, horn, drum, accordion, and zither. In front of this, on a music stand is an original watercolour *Self portrait* depicting Max Oppenheimer, (a Viennese Secession painter whose life at Auschwitz was prolonged by playing in the concentration camp orchestra) naked from the waist up. By using seemingly *official* elements in the framed diary documentation pages - notations, addresses, rubber stamps that cover the exhibition walls right to the corners of the room in this self-styled homage - Darboven presents us with passive, external verifications of personal identity that fit neatly into an encyclopaedic formalism whose language typifies the hermetic codes of the minimalist ideology. All that we see interspersed at intervals along these framed pages is names, cryptographic writing, a self portrait of Darboven and photos of Oppenheimer's portrait that repeat at standardized intervals. We sense the oppressive feeling that *real* times or history can never be entirely evaded and these images act as a kind of synthetic conscience. We do not like to recognize this kind of mimetic afterthought in a era where the superficial image supercedes any real experience, however tragic or painful. The truly mournful component of this work is in the fact that it continues to bear witness to the continuity of time by displacing it, compacting it and condensing references. As we listen to the near Gregorian austerity of one of Darboven and Stoppa's musical compositions being piped into the gallery, we are reminded of Theodor Adorno's lamentable comment that after the Holocaust there could be no more poetry.

In *Quartett 88* (1988), we again see a centrepiece that offsets the walls of transcribed annotations, an antique manikin of a woman intended to represent "everywoman" from the past but whose arms and fingers are missing. Dressed in Victorian undergarments with her hair tied up in a bun and enclosed in a glass exhibition case, this woman is meant to be a stenographer but looks more like a exhibit from a Museum of Civilization. Amid the notes and nameless scripting encased in frames, photos of this manikin, "the human equivalent of the now obsolete Burroughs adding machine", occur at regular intervals alongside sporadic photos of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Marie Curie and Rosa Luxembourg, each of them atypical women who led difficult lives. The word *heute* (today) is inscribed at the bottom of each page, then crossed out.

The most immediately overwhelming work in the show is *Existenz* (1989), which draws on 22 years of Darboven's meticulous diaristic notations (1966-1988). 2, 261 panels range over all available space on the walls of this large exhibition room reaching up to fifteen feet in height, from the first cover of the diary to the last page of the last. Each frame contains a photo of two pages of Darboven's diary appointments. Phone numbers, references to major political and historic events, and even the maps and conversion tables common to diaries are reproduced. The sheer volume of material, the impacting of such a literal method of depicting the passage of time, explodes our sense of reality. In the centre of the room stands a curiously ironic stuffed goat, one of many Hanne Darboven has had over the years, each named Mickey. Another piece in the show, *Notation* (1989) is a 49 page transcription of Darboven's Quartet Opus 26.

Now 50 years old, Hanne Darboven was born in Munich in 1941. She came to New York in 1965 at the age of 24 and although she knew almost no-one, she was already working on *systems*, black dots on white board and graph paper works in a larger scale covered with words, numbers, dots, and geometric lines. This highly self-referential form of art became, for her, a necessity that gave her own daily life a balance through its working structure and method. Some of these *systems* she fabricated were based on music and through a complicated method of contriving numbers she made musical notations that were in her own words *serious, not serial*. Indeed, 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».<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 60's Darboven's art was grouped with that of the conceptualists as it extemporized its more human characteristics, passing effortlessly from the intellectual to the sensuous. 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



Hanne Darboven, *Existenz*, 1989 (detail).  
Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art  
Foundation. Photo: Robert Keziere.

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.»<sup>5</sup> 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»<sup>5</sup>, 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 paperback 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.»<sup>6</sup>

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 metaphoric potential and leaves only the art in art. It is her personal system, one that seeks to mechanize the personal, 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.»<sup>7</sup>

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»<sup>8</sup> - 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»<sup>9</sup> itself now seems redundant. Our future vision of art has surpassed any ideational, 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 memento out of this world of the past, of a past view of art. Her art is an extemporal timepiece that embodies the ideational 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.<sup>10</sup> ♦

- 1 Hanne Darboven, quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Crater*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), p. 187.
- 2 Lucy Lippard, *Overlay; Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 96.
- 3 Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff (London: Chatto, 1929; N. Y.: Random House, 1928), p. 61.
- 4 Chandler, John & Lippard, Lucy R., *The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. London 1968.
- 5 Lippard, Lucy R., *Deep in Numbers*. Artforum, no.2 (October 1973), p. 39.
- 6 Perniola, Mario, "Critical Reflections", *Artforum*, XXIX, no. 10, (Summer 1991), p. 104.
- 7 Morris, Robert, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making", *Artforum*, no. 7, (April 1970), p. 65.
- 8 F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman, in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1927), p. 896.
- 9 Heiner Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), pp. 67-68.
- 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 *Urzeit/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 Cosje 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.