The World is Real: Writing, Counting, and Reading in the Art of Hanne Darboven

by

Kalie Stieda

B.A. (Hons), University of British Columbia, 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Germanic Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2017

© Kalie Stieda, 2017
Abstract

This thesis seeks to approach the work of German artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009) through the operations of writing, counting, and reading. In the language of New German Media Theory, these operations are known as elementary cultural techniques. I will trace the thematization of these techniques by analyzing Hanne Darboven’s art through what are known as her text formulations (schreibe, beschreibe nicht, schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben, and gedankenstrich). These formulations are all inherently tautological, an aspect which links them to the recursivity of cultural techniques. These techniques are “articulations of the real,” ontic operations that exist a priori of the ontological concepts they generate, producing a difference between established pillars of meaning. Though many critics of Darboven see her art as the evocation of transcendental concepts like history and time, my research will show that Darboven is ultimately concerned with how these operations ground her process in the fabric of the world. Darboven’s art is not a rational realization of the values of the Enlightenment, nor is it a mathematical proof with infinite variations. It is rather a recursive system that is infinite only in its repetition of its own process, which is also a personal method of coping with daily life invented by the artist.
Lay Summary

This thesis looks at the art of German artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009) through the theoretical framework of cultural techniques, a subset of New German Media Theory. It seeks to uncover how the operations of writing, counting, and reading emerge as key elements of Darboven’s artistic process.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kalie Stieda
**Table of Contents**

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... ii
Lay Summary................................................................................................................................... iii
Preface................................................................................................................................................ iv
Table of Contents.............................................................................................................................. v
List of Figures................................................................................................................................. vi
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... vii
Section I: Introduction – Before We Begin......................................................................................1
Section II: Work and Non Work.......................................................................................................8
Section III: Cultural Techniques – The Noise Made By People...................................................20
Section IV: schreibe, beschreibe nicht.............................................................................................29
Section V: schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben.............................................................................37
Section VI: gedankenstrich..............................................................................................................48
Section VII: Conclusion – You and Me in Time .............................................................................55
Figures.............................................................................................................................................59
Works Cited.....................................................................................................................................66
List of Figures


Figure 4. Stamp. Scanned from *Hanne Darboven Enlightenment - Time Histories: A Retrospective*. Munich: Prestel, 2015. Catalogue obtained courtesy of Susanne Kleine at Bunderskunsthalle Bonn................................................................. 62

Figure 5. *Schreibzeit* Band III, p. 20. Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University................................................................. 63

Figure 6. *Schreibzeit* Band III, p. x (0). Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University................................................................. 64

Figure 7. *Schreibzeit* Band III, p. 1. Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University................................................................. 65
Acknowledgements

I offer my enduring gratitude to my supervisory committee, Dr. Ilinca Iurascu, Dr. Jaleh Mansoor, and Dr. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young for their advice and support throughout the research and writing process of this thesis. I would also like to extend my thanks to Nicole Krapat and Florentine Gallwas at the Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Susanne Kleine at Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, and Dr. Brigid Doherty at Princeton for their generous assistance with my research.

Special thanks go out to my dear friend Laura Mars for all her encouragement and help with editing, even in the final hours, and to all my friends for supporting me through what was at times a long and arduous process. Thank you also to Angus Reid for introducing me to the art of Hanne Darboven and sparking what would turn out to be a lifelong interest in her work. My parents, Alexander and Samantha Stieda, and my grandparents, George and Irmgard Farrah, also deserve a heartfelt thank-you for supporting me emotionally throughout my Masters Degree, even though they hadn’t the faintest idea what I was studying.
Section I: Introduction – Before We Begin

*Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.*


Safely nestled within a cocoon of contemporary art on the West side of Manhattan in the Chelsea arts district, an exhibition of German artist Hanne Darboven’s work is on view until July of two thousand and seventeen entitled *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* (*Cultural History 1880-1983*). Inside Dia Art Foundation, beneath exposed ceiling beams, the thousands of framed pages that line the white walls of the gallery pulsate to the monotonous rhythm of a double bass playing a loop of ascending four-note arpeggios. Here, Darboven’s artistic allegiances to the United States and Germany are intertwined with a century of historical ruptures between these two political superpowers. In turn, these associations are reflected back upon the present-day city of New York, prompting the viewer to remember the drama currently unfolding on the world’s stage and ask how the present moment fits into the collective notion of history.

---

1 According to Dietmar Rübel and Petra Lange-Berndt, during the spring and summer of 1968, when Hanne Darboven was still honing her artistic practice, the artist read the writings of Borges “intensively”

2 In an effort to emulate Hanne Darboven’s practice of writing counting and counting writing (*schreibe rechnen, rechne schreiben*) all dates in this paper (excluding those that are part of citations) will be written out orthographically.
Indeed, many of the issues addressed by Hanne Darboven are resurfacing, albeit in mutated forms, revealing anew the relevance to her work. The years between two thousand eight and two thousand sixteen saw mounting political and social tensions globally, the tangible consequences of rising temperatures in the Arctic, the ostensible failure of neo-liberalism to maintain order, the subsequent polarization of popular ideology, and mankind’s rapidly accelerating retreat into virtual realities and the devices that mediate our relationship to these worlds. The year two thousand and sixteen was also the year that German artist Hanne Darboven would have turned seventy-five. Recently, Hanne Darboven has experienced a quiet renaissance, beginning with the first ever major retrospective of her work in late two thousand and fifteen exhibited concurrently at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn. Before last year’s exhibition of Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 in New York City, Darboven’s “magnum opus” had not been shown in the United States for over a decade (Enwezor 171). On the opposite side of the North American continent, three works—Erdkunde I, II, II, Leben, leben, and Fin de Siècle – Buch der Bilder were shown at Sprüth-Magers gallery in Los Angeles in the fall of two-thousand-and-sixteen, while earlier that year, Evolution Leibniz <86> was shown in Berlin at Galerie Crone.

The simultaneity of these exhibitions was intended as a transcontinental celebration of Hanne Darboven’s life and work, marking the passing of time from the artist’s death until today. But this acknowledgement of time passing known as the anniversary year prompts viewers to look beyond what Darboven might be saying about culture, history, or politics. This reintroduction of Hanne Darboven to the art world, especially on the North American side, calls for an inquiry into the conditions that enable the artist to manipulate such established concepts as history, time, and language.
Darboven’s pseudo-mathematical system of adding together dates from the Gregorian calendar to get the theoretical basis for her constructions, the “K-value,” has been described as many things. It is, to recall a few: “time made visible” (Honnef 12); a “search for pure language” (Dietrich 19); “the artist’s real writing of history” (Doherty 44); and a way to “personify time” (van Bruggen 71). Brigid Doherty (35) and Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel (25) both compare Darboven’s ‘system’ to German media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s notion of Aufschreibesysteme—“discourse networks composed of machinery, institutions, instruments, mathematical regimes, and inscriptions” (Geoghegan 67). Kittler’s Discourse Networks 1800/1900 argues that the dominant media technologies of any epoch make the “conditions of thought, imagination, and subjectivity” available to human beings, enabling processes of acculturation (Young 164). The claim that Hanne Darboven’s work is able to act as a Discourse Network, thereby transmitting, processing, and storing the data that creates culture, requires further analysis.

A large portion of the most recent scholarship on Darboven still fixates on her position as a German artist dealing with the aftermath of Germany’s fraught history. This kind of work places emphasis on the counter-historical aspects of Darboven’s practice and her position within the canon of postwar German art production. Benjaminian allusions abound in an effort to show how Darboven’s work is a continuation of the former’s Passagenwerk. Other writers evoke Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas in conjunction with Gerhard Richter’s Atlas to discuss the role of the archive in Darboven’s work as a paratactic mnemonic device in which the artist performs the role of collector. Lastly, most, if not all, interpretations find their central thesis in Darboven’s

3 See Hainely (187); Adler (42); Newman (147); Enwezor (171-181)
4 See Jussen (32-35), Dietrich (15), Adler (40-41), Newman (139-141), Enwezor (175)
manipulation of time through her pseudo-mathematical system of serial notation. These interpretations tend to overlap as critics attempt to solve the riddle of Darboven’s open secret.

To read or not to read? That is a question to which Hanne Darboven has an answer—namely both, and neither. Darboven needed to experience reading physically, through the process of the rewriting-out of words by hand (Lippard “Deep in Numbers”). In her repetition of words and numbers, time first seems to stand still and then breaks down, and all things begin to resemble one another.5 “i do like to write / i don’t like to read” — so writes Darboven in a letter to artist Sol LeWitt dated October nineteenth, nineteen seventy-three (Fig. 1). And yet, a few lines down the page, she contradicts herself, writing: “all what is written i read / all what i write is written / i write / i d’ont [sic] describe.” In order to read, Darboven must write—her writing process is simultaneously a counting and a reading process, but one that does not describe anything but writing itself. Darboven is writing-writing, counting-writing, and reading-writing. When thought of in this way, some new questions about Darboven’s work begin to emerge: Is a text that is copied-out by hand and presented without comment not the same as the original text itself and therefore not writing in the sense of the articulation of one’s interior thoughts? If Darboven’s wavy script is the writing of writing, then is her copying-out of canonical literary material and encyclopedia entries the negation of this writing? If Darboven is writing out her calculations and calculating her writing activities, at what solution does she arrive, if any?

The answers to these questions are laid out clearly before the viewer in what are known as Darboven’s text formulations, cryptic maxims that weave their way through Darboven’s entire oeuvre. Dispersed among hundreds of literary passages copied-out and presented without comment, rows upon rows of non-signifying ‘u-lines’, pages of time calculations, bureaucratic

5 See Borges, “A New Refutation of Time”
outpourings of meticulously—if arbitrarily—noted dates, and images of objects, both appropriated and belonging to the artist herself, there is a “small arsenal of constantly recurring text formulations” that permeates Hanne Darboven’s oeuvre (Jussen 23). These formulations are Darboven’s own words, personal mantras repeated in writing *ad infinitum*. Their repetition should not discount their significance—on the contrary, it is on these formulations that the viewer must rely to cut through the noise of numerical, mathematical, historical, literary, or calendrical information presented in any given work. But in turn, the formulations themselves are caught in an endless loop of noise, as they are often crossed out, negated, yet always remaining on the page. The most commonly occurring of these formulations are: heute [today]; tagesrechnung [day calculation]; und eine welt noch [and still a world]; und keine worte mehr [and no more words]; schreibe auf/ab [write down/copy out]; schreibe hinauf und hinunter [write onto and underneath]; die sonnenuhr, das mondlicht [the sundial, the moonlight]; schreibe rechnen, rechne schreiben [write calculating, calculate writing]; gedankenstrich [dash]; schreibe, beschreibe nicht [write, don’t describe]; 1 + 1 => 1, 2 – 2 => 1, 2 [eins plus eins ist eins, zwei – oder – zwei ist einszwei] (Jussen 23).

As the artist herself has said many times: Mein Geheimnis ist, dass ich keins habe. Hanne Darboven’s secret is that she has none, her secrets are operations that recursively generate themselves through their own negation, carrying her system forward. They are media materialities that hide in plain sight due to their ubiquitousness, present as they are in every aspect of the work. In the language of New German Media Theory, these operations are known as the elementary cultural techniques of writing, reading, and counting. To have a secret and have it be “none” is a tautology, the naming of a thing and its simultaneous refutation. The above

---

6 “…einem kleinen Arsenal von immer wiederkehrenden Textformeln.” Jussen, 23. All translations from German sources on Hanne Darboven are my own unless otherwise stated.
quotation from Jorge Luis Borges, like Darboven’s textual formulations, uses tautology to show how the self is woven into the fabric of the world. Immanence defines the operations of writing, counting, and reading, as they are what media theorist Bernhard Siegert calls “articulations of the real.” Not only do these techniques structure Darboven’s artistic process, but they are also the content around which this process revolves, and on which all other thematic aspects of her work are based. Emphatic history, the abstract notion of time, and the authority of the Western literary canon are all ontological concepts that cannot be articulated without these ontic operations. The thematization of these operations and what they do, how they sift through the ocean of informational noise that undulates between established ports of meaning, form the core of Darboven’s artistic inquiry.

This thesis will show how the operations of writing, counting, and reading are a central component of Hanne Darboven’s practice that are always present in the work, even when they are hidden or negated. In fact, their negation is often what causes them to become visible, emerging from their comfortable position in the background. These operations weave in and out of each other in a game of hide and seek; indeed, they are such fundamentally basic processes that, for many critics, they evoke the memorization drills imposed on students in grade school.¹ I will trace these operations through Darboven’s oeuvre by following the recursions of her textual formulations. The formulations are dependent on each other; one cannot exist without the presence of the others. An extensive exploration of each formulation has yet to be completed, but I will limit my analysis to four formulations that I see as corresponding to the elementary techniques listed above.

¹ See Lippard (‘‘Deep in Numbers’’), Graw (249), and Busche quoted in Bippus (186)
I will begin by reviewing the existing scholarship on Hanne Darboven in order to identify what I see as a tendency to resort to description when faced with the sheer magnitude of the artist’s output. While these interpretations are by no means incorrect, I believe that, in their efforts to unequivocally understand Darboven’s work and practice, they have missed fundamentally simple, but structurally essential aspects of this artist’s legacy. The next section will outline my methodology, namely the subset of New German Media Theory known as cultural techniques (Kulturtechniken). Drawing on the work of leading scholars in the field, I explain what cultural techniques are and how this method of critical engagement is opening up new channels for the writing of art history. I will then apply this methodology to Darboven’s textual formulations, exploring how the techniques of writing, counting, and reading make themselves visible in a selection of her works, focusing primarily on excerpts from the over four thousand page book-work, Schreibzeit. In Section IV, the operation of writing will be read through the formulation schreibe, beschreibe nicht [writing without describing]. The formulation schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben [writing counting/counting writing] and its numerical mirror 1 + 1 => 1, 2 — 2 => 1, 2 will guide the discussion of the operation of counting in Section V. Finally, Section VI will explore the operation of reading (which was a point of contention for Darboven) through the formulation gedankenstrich and its crossed-out counterpart (gedankenstrich).
Section II: Work and Non Work

When describing the initial experience of approaching *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983*, both seasoned art historians and lay-viewers will inevitably mention feeling disoriented or even oppressed by the work’s magnitude. Standing within the exhibition—for one is always *within* a work of Darboven’s and never merely in front of it—the viewer feels what many critics have described as a “rhythmic” “wholeness” (Lippard “Deep in Numbers”). This feeling of wholeness is contradicted by the simultaneous sensation that one can never fully ‘understand’ Darboven’s work as a completed entity, but only gape in awe at the work’s overwhelming deluge of archival material: one thousand five hundred and ninety sheets of found postcards clustered together at random within single frames; three decades of *Der Spiegel* covers, their red borders echoed as frames for the contents of an exhibition catalogue of postwar European and American art, as well as in reproductions of parts of Darboven’s work *Schreibzeit*; facsimiles of other works by the artist; kitsch landscapes from a literary calendar; references to the First and Second World Wars; headshots of pop culture icons juxtaposed with a repeated image of a large format camera; images of New York doorways taken by Darboven’s friend and fellow Conceptual artist Roy Colmer; geometric textile patterns, and pages of Darboven’s check-sum calculations, calendars, and ‘writings’. This litany of historical ephemera is safeguarded by nineteen sculptural objects populating the floor space of the gallery, including a large crescent moon that hangs from the ceiling, two mannequins in French jogging outfits, a bust of Adenauer, and a life-size wooden robot. The work’s wholeness is confirmed by the index, which presumably ‘concludes’ *Kulturgeschichte* by imposing limits upon it (Newman 150). Yet, even after hours of

---

8 See Newman, Adler,
examination, one is left suspended in the liminal space of the work of art, still pouring over Darboven’s endless repetition of data, searching for conclusions.

What does it mean to understand a work of art? Though Kulturgeschichte is by Darboven’s meticulous standards a finished work, it is often approached as heterogeneous and open for interpretation. Over the course of my research, I have noticed a tendency in the writing on Darboven to describe what the work is like in lieu of a concrete thesis outlining what the work is. Rather than take Darboven at her word, critics are convinced that she is hiding something, some larger program that will be an answer all existential dilemmas. These interpretations usually begin with a caveat, followed by a promise: ‘This work may seem incomprehensible and all-encompassing,’ they say, ‘but fear not, for all may be reduced to a system into which every notation and object can be neatly inserted and accounted for.’ Many interpretations, as Isabelle Graw puts it, “approach Darboven’s work as they would a math problem, for which there has to be a solution somewhere” (Graw 250). These ‘solutions’ inevitably arrive at similar conclusions, namely that Darboven’s work is made up of archival constellations that merge the transcendental with the personal, the sublime with the bureaucratic, to arrive at a counter-history based on the visualization and writing of time. Though Darboven’s panels appear intertextual and thus open to a variety of possible conclusions, the work is a closed system in which information is able to circulate as unintelligible data.

The Benjminian aspects of Darboven’s work have been covered extensively, to a point where each further comparison to “Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image or constellation” has become all too predictable (Adler 14). While these Benjaminian allusions come close to where my analysis begins—with Darboven’s use of repetition—they are always in response to the question of Darboven’s writing or rewriting of cultural history (“Is she or isn’t she?”).
Vanessa Places makes an effort to show how Darboven’s work is a continuation of Benjamin’s fragmented *Passagenwerk* (Arcades Project). In her article for X-TRA, Place opines that Benjamin’s montage of quotations that is both a “critique of bourgeois nineteenth century historiography and an encyclopedia of ephemera” is better left unfinished, as its completion “would have formally betrayed his allegory of history as a ruin” (“Hanne Darboven”). Place goes on to make the haphazard claim that

Darboven’s production surpasses Benjamin as her failure to synthesize is itself intentionally synthesized and synthetic, while being also manifestly written, rewritten, and unwritten. In other words, Darboven’s allegories are themselves allegorical. The answer thus becomes-allegorical of: the message is the medium. (“Hanne Darboven”)

The thesis Place puts forward is arguably similar to my own, namely that Darboven’s work is grounded in fundamentally simple materialities of communication. But this point gets muddled in Place’s overuse of jargon in an attempt to make her stale reference to Benjamin relevant. Though Darboven tells histories and stories, they are not allegorical as such as they eschew all narrative form.

Hanne Darboven and Walter Benjamin do however share some notable similarities. Like Benjamin’s allegorical constellations, Darboven manipulates historical ephemera to bring all things hurtling into the simultaneity of the present, arriving at possible alternative histories. In his essay on *Schreibzeit*, Bernhard Jussen notes that the idiosyncrasies in the work are paradigmatic of Walter Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit*.
the technique of fragmentation, namely the eschewal of argumentative linearity and especially the continuous interweaving of the moment of writing with the past made present, that is to say, the relinquishing of chronological linearity” (Schreibzeit 34).9

There is no question that Hanne Darboven’s work performs a particular kind of what sociologist Oskar Negt and filmmaker/cultural theorist Alexander Kluge call Gegengeschichte, or counterhistory.10 In their book History and Obstinacy, Negt and Kluge weave a counterhistory that is an “inventory of experiences and capacities [that seems] utterly factual and objective, delivered in the rationalist idiom of a reference work, but at the same time, …also appears fundamentally unrealistic, if not bizarre and fantastical” (Fore 63). This mode of history writing is influenced by the theoretical practices of the Frankfurt School, as well as Alexander Kluge’s cinematic and literary experiments with photo- and textual-montage. Counterhistory is a clear continuation of Walter Benjamin, as Devin Fore sums up his definition of the term with “Benjamin’s seventh thesis on the philosophy of history, brushing history against the grain” (63).

This is Benjamin’s historical materialism, which “is concerned with reactivating the past as repressed potential by blasting apart the temporal continuum in which everything keeps to its predetermined place” (Newman 128). Echoing Jussen, Michael Newman writes that Darboven has managed to take Benjamin’s “countermemory” a step further, or, rather, to suspend it in a state of perpetual delay (133):

9 “die Technik des Fragmentierens, also den Verzicht auf argumentative Linearität und besonders das dauernde Verweben der Gegenwart des Schreibens mit der vergegenwärtigen Vergangenheit, also den Verzicht auf chronologische Linearität.” (p 34)
10 See Jussen Schreibzeit and Krüger “Medien und Metapher”
Darboven’s way of dealing with this problem is to tear chronology away from the temporal continuum—from the sequence along which representations can be arrayed like beads on a thread—and to re-establish continuity in a nonlinear way, as correlations of sums of dates, a purely abstract and empty measure that takes the form of rationality but without content or meaning (132).

Newman’s conception of Darboven’s “cultural history of repetition” is extrapolated from Benjamin’s ideas of historical rupture and redemption (126). Newman takes issue with Benjamin’s “promise of redemption,” as it presupposes an idea of history that promises transcendence. Transcendence is “the redemptive link between past and future—insofar as past and future can be conceived within the immanence of the present” (133). Newman prefers to conceptualize Darboven’s historical repetition as “transcendence-in-waiting” (133), a “cultural history that presents both the end of cultural history and the impossibility of bringing cultural history to an end” (150). But, as I outline below, associating Darboven’s practice with any kind of transcendence is to fundamentally misunderstand her work.

What sorts of conclusions do these comparisons of Darboven’s practice with Benjamin’s counterhistorical program lead? As the title of Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 suggests, Hanne Darboven is concerned with all that may come to pass over the course of one century (Ein Jahrhundert). Being one of the Nachgeborenen, the future generation born during or after the Second World War in Germany, for Darboven, dealing with history means facing the legacy of National Socialism. It is a mistake, however, to define Hanne Darboven as a postwar artist.

The dilemma that the history of National Socialism poses for the German Artist is openly acknowledged in Kulturgeschichte: underneath a quote by Bertolt Brecht (“Menschen ist Pöbel. 
“Gott ist ein Faschist.”), Darboven paraphrases the infamous words of yet another German intellectual exiled to America. “Nach Auschwitz kann man keine Gedichte mehr schreiben,” she writes, excluding Theodor Adorno’s original admonition that writing poetry after Auschwitz is “barbaric.” Underneath this, the artist writes her own command: “und keine worte mehr.” It is not only poetry that is prohibited after the catastrophe of the Shoah, but words entirely. Aside from this open acknowledgement of her position as a German artist working “after Auschwitz,” specific references to the trauma of the Second World War are notably absent from her oeuvre. And yet, critics still grasp onto this biographical detail and ride the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* train from Schleswig-Holstein to Bavaria, picking up shame, guilt, and repression along the way.

In his review of the Dia: Chelsea exhibition of *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* in the February two thousand and seventeen issue of *Artforum*, Bruce Hainely protests that “no one seems willing to see the grids and systems as a way of confronting the derangement of the German culture Darboven was born into” (189). Yet the fact that Darboven’s work is “to a large extent determined by… National Socialism and the Holocaust” is perhaps the most obvious conclusion that could be drawn from an experience with her work, especially in regards to *Kulturgeschichte* (Newman 131). In his essay “Rembering and Repeating,” which was published twenty years prior to Hainely’s *Artforum* article and also concerns an exhibition of *Kulturgeschichte* at Dia, Michael Newman writes: “Considering the artist’s preoccupation with history and memory, [Darboven’s work can be placed] within the context of the so-called German problem: the question of how to remember the Holocaust without relativizing it, how to re-establish connection with a retrospectively contaminated history” (147). As outline above, Newman evokes this history in order to claim that Darboven’s practice is an alternative approach
to cultural history, one that is neither based on totalization, following Karl Lamprecht, nor on interruption, following Walter Benjamin, but on repetition.

Unlike some of her contemporaries, such as Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter, Hanne Darboven’s main program is not the overcoming of traumatic memories deriving from Germany’s past, whether collective or personal. To insinuate this is to reduce Darboven’s art to mere metaphor. The cover of Dan Adler’s book on *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* does this rather egregiously, choosing—out of the thousands of images included in the work—an enlargement of two postcards that appear beside each other: an illustration of a German child raising a wooden spoon to its mouth and a photograph of Adolf Hitler performing the *Hitlergruß*. Bruce Hainley is adamant that *Kulturgeschichte* is a straightforward allegory for the trauma perpetrated and experienced by the Germans during the war and the struggle to come to terms with that trauma in the postwar era. In Darboven’s signature non-signifying script, Hainely sees “a pall of smoke, rising,” “gas spreading,” and even “the tattoos used at Auschwitz” (188). This is by no means the only “obvious” connection to concentration camps Hainley sees in *Kulturgeschichte*, making the obtuse extrapolation from the title of Isabelle Graw’s essay “Work Ennobles—I’m staying bourgeois [Arbeit adelt—ich bleibe bürgerlich] (Hanne Darboven)” to *Arbeit macht frei* (188). To bolster his point, Hainley quotes extensively from German author W.G. Sebald. But while Sebald’s melancholic prose-fictions also offer no promise of redemption, they are steeped in allegory, something Darboven takes pains to avoid. Hainely also focuses largely on Darboven’s *Für Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (1982-1983), likening Darboven’s collection of objects to the “reality effects” produced by Fassbinder and his mother acting as themselves on camera in the film *Germany in Autumn* (1978) (193). Yet while the connections between Benjamin, Kluge, Fassbinder, and Sebald are apparent, Darboven remains irreducible to this postwar mould, as her
project is by no means solely dedicated to the ‘task’ of coping with the German past, whether on a national or personal level.

Another common reference point for Hanne Darboven’s work is the ‘Atlas’ model in Aby Warburg’s unfinished “model of historical memory,” *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Buchloh 124), and Gerhard Richter’s ongoing *Atlas* project. When looking at *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* alone, the parallels between Darboven, Richter, and Warburg’s respective projects are apparent. As Benjamin Buchloh writes, both Richter’s *Atlas* and Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* are monumental projects that “set out to gather identifiable forms of memory” (122). Both projects involve grid-like arrangements of images, in which

the telling of history as a sequence of events acted out by individual agents is displaced by a focus on the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating agents, and the process of history is reconceived as a structural system of perpetually changing interactions and permutations between economic and ecological givens, class formations and their ideologies, and the resulting types of social and cultural interactions specific to each particular moment. (129)

While Darboven’s work could be described in this way, her practice differs widely from both *Atlas* projects at the level of structure. Richter’s *Atlas* serves as an “‘explanatory’ supplement to his ‘primary’ process of painting” and is thus more of an image bank than a cohesive work (Adler 46). Like Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*, Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* went unfinished before the art historian’s untimely death. Warburg’s project focuses on the “organization and presentation of vast quantities of historical information without any textual commentary” and
without adhering to any overarching system. While they share aesthetic qualities, Darboven’s work “is more fundamentally an ontological practice, while Richter’s and [Warburg’s] can be judged to be more analytical (Enwezor 173). The mnemonic function of Darboven’s work is internal rather than external. The artist chooses material from the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries for her content, but the mnemonic function of the work is not directed towards pathos or collective identity. Darboven’s paratactic placement of images, quoted material, and words serves not to evoke associations of past trauma, but to bring to mind the very function of the work itself, its reoccurring structure.

Much of the existing scholarship on Darboven was written by people fortunate enough to have had a direct personal relationship with the artist herself. It is perhaps for this reason that many texts strive to take the work to the limits of interpretation, focusing on the artist’s loftiest endeavour, to create an individuated Gesamtkunstwerk that quests for universal knowledge (Enwezor 174). A hermeneutic approach to her work is encouraged:

To open up and unlock the logic of her art, it seems as if the viewer must inhabit the character of the mole, burrowing and working his or her way inside-out from the difficulties her challenging and absorbing work poses. In this sense, viewers—like the Minotaur in the labyrinth—must plot their way from the topology of the artist’s dense textual and archival agglomerations into the expansive, panoramic surveys that constitute the detritus of materials, images, objects, typologies, and musical, notational, and cultural signs and symbols. (Enwezor 175)
But can the “logic” of such an idiosyncratic artist truly be gleaned by the total immersion Okwui Enwezor (who was co-curator of the two thousand and fifteen Hanne Darboven Retrospective, *Aufklärung-Zeitgeschichten*) suggests? The impulse to delve into Darboven’s oeuvre in a search for transcendental meaning is the same impulse that Rosalind Krauss observes in the criticism surrounding Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt.

Hanne Darboven’s pseudo-mathematical system of serial notation was first conceived during her time in New York City in the late nineteen sixties, where she had an integral role in the development of the Conceptual Art movement alongside artists such as Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, and Carl Andre. Ostensibly rational, the work of these artists has often been misconstrued as the representation of some transcendental order, with Darboven as no exception. In her essay, “LeWitt in Progress,” Krauss challenges the assertion by many writers that LeWitt’s series are “the illustration of Mind” in the Cartesian sense (48). There is an expectation from many writing on the work of Darboven and LeWitt that there will eventually be

the discovery of a root principle, an axiom by which all the variables of a given system might be accounted for. It is the moment of grasping the idea or theorem that both generates the system and also explains it. Seen as being interior to the system, and constituting the very ground of its unity, the center is also visualized as being above or outside it. (52)

Darboven’s system only *appears* axiomatic; what we understand to be the “K-value”, the apparent basis of all her _Konstruktionen_, is not grounded in any mathematical logic and cannot be applied by anyone other than the artist herself. To use the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as a
backdrop for Darboven’s art, as was done at the Munich portion of her retrospective exhibition, is to imply that works like *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* and *Schreibzeit* possess rational conclusions that are lying in wait to be discovered by the committed “mole-like” viewer. Considering Darboven’s lifelong collaborative relationship with LeWitt and her foothold in Conceptual Art and Minimalism, to attribute the phenomenological and philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment to her project seems rather short sighted.

Darboven was a master of “the deadpan, the fixed stare, [and] the uninflected repetitious speech” with which Krauss characterizes LeWitt and his contemporaries (60). This gave her the air of an enlightened philosopher, complete with her no-nonsense cropped hair, tailored grey suits, and practical trainers. Yet her work is anything but transcendental: her “math is far too simple; [her] solutions are far too inelegant; the formal conditions of [her] work are far too scattered and obsessional to produce anything like the diagram of human reason these writers seem to call for” (53). Obsession is a key term here, for serial progressions like those of LeWitt and Darboven reveal a kind of “mad obstinacy” in the makers (54), one that is immediately off-putting to “the audience of a wider culture,” who see the thousands of pages of numbers and scribbles as “baffling and meaningless” (51). These viewers are not wrong, for one would have to be a little mad to dedicate ones entire life to the writing-out of a system, of which the purpose is nothing other than its very writing-out.

In a way reminiscent of Darboven’s own literary parataxis, Krauss reproduces a passage from Samuel Beckett’s *Malloy* parallel to her text on LeWitt, allowing it to slowly unfold before acknowledging its existence in her essay. The passage, in which a character attempts to suck sixteen stones in turn without ever sucking the same stone twice, is “an extraordinary performance of ‘thinking’, where it is clear that the object of this ‘thought’ is entirely contained
within the brilliance of the routine” (58). This focus on routine, on the process of the works being-completed, is the mode with which I am concerned in my thesis. Some critics of Darboven have already turned their attention to this the prevalence of this process. For Briony Fer, Hanne Darboven’s mysterious wavy script is “a ritual re-enactment of certain processes, like writing,” whose emphasis on continuation leaves both the work and the viewing of the work with a feeling of being incomplete (205). In her piece entitled “Today Crossed Out,” Coosje van Bruggen observes that Darboven’s “work always has its basis in reality, in the actual time it takes to do the writing” (73). And finally, Elke Bippus sees Darboven’s “understanding of the work of art as one that is implicitly processual, referring to the work as a momentary figuration, claiming that her system of date calculations has emerged from the work itself” (187). The operations of writing, counting, and reading are the literal articulations of Darboven’s self-generating work.
Section III: Cultural Techniques – The Noise Made By People

In nineteen sixty-six, when Hanne Darboven was twenty-four, the burgeoning artist left her family’s pastoral estate outside of Hamburg, Am Burgberg, to pursue her career in New York City. Already prone to reclusiveness, during her first two weeks in the Big Apple, Darboven did not leave her apartment at all (Smerling Mein Geheimnis). The isolation of the metropolis was of a different sort than that of Am Burgberg, compelling the twenty-four-year-old Darboven to “impose upon herself a survival routine of daily rounds of work, galleries, and the art supply store, where she was considered eccentric and asked about the reams of graph paper she bought” (Lippard “Deep in Numbers”). It was important to keep working, starting one project after another and never running the risk of slowing down. It is possible to describe Darboven’s entire practice through the notion of this process:

still each time I have to write, it becomes so calm and so normal. There is no story there, nothing to figure out, not a secret, but still exciting. I feel myself not thinking what other people think, but what I think. I write for myself, there is no other way. This is for me.

Going on is the enormous thing that I do. (Darboven quoted Lippard “Deep in Numbers”)

Darboven’s practice of daily writing began as a method of coping, not only with the past, as was the German preoccupation, but with reality itself. It is both a daily imposition of order on a chaotic mind, and the introduction of chaotic order onto an artificially organized world. Writing is therapeutic, a mediator between the hand and mind, two of the bodily organs that are most likely to wander.
Thus, in Darboven’s work, interruption becomes necessary, but not such much at the level of the writing of history as on the personal day-to-day. As the artist herself has said:

I build something up by disturbing something (destruction — structure — construction). A system became necessary, how else could I see more concentratedly, find some interest, continue, go on at all? Contemplation had to be interrupted by action as a means of accepting anything among everything. No acceptance at all = chaos. I try to move, to expand and contract as far as possible between more or less known and unknown limits. At times I feel closer while doing a series, and at times afterwards. But whether I come closer or not, it is still one experience. Whether positive or negative, I know it then. Everything is a proof, for the negative that a positive exists, and vice versa…. I couldn’t recreate my so-called system. It depends on things done previously. The materials consist of paper and pencil with which I draw my conceptions, write words and numbers, which are the most simple means of putting down my ideas; for ideas do not depend on materials. The nature of idea is immateriality. All things have plenty of variations and varieties, so they can be changed. (quoted in Lippard “Deep in Numbers”)

By “depending on things done previously,” in other words, by referring to itself, Darboven’s “so-called system” is the literal going-on of the communicative process, a priori of communicable content. The action of articulating an idea, through the gestural operations of writing, counting, or reading, exists even before that idea has been fully formed in the mind.

In order to discuss these operations and how they are thematized in Hanne Darboven’s art, I will employ a recent strain of so-called New German Media Theory known as cultural
techniques. Cultural techniques have been at the center of a series of critical discussions on media theory and media archaeology for the past fifteen years.\textsuperscript{11} In their explanation of this theoretical framework, leading scholars of cultural techniques like Bernhard Siegert and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young usually begin with a history of New German Media Theory. Unlike communication studies, which focused on mass media objects like radio, television, and film, New German Media Theory “shifted the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation, from semantics itself to the exterior and material conditions of what constitutes semantics,” which Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht called “‘the materialities of communication’” (Siegert 2). Kittler and many of those associated with the turn to media analysis began with an oblique look at literature, aiming to provide an alternative to “French theory’s fixation on discourse” by focusing on the material and historical operations of media as coming before the problem of discourse, going “beyond the hermeneutic reading of texts” (Siegert 5). One of Kittler’s many quotable (if often cryptic) maxims outlines the project of New German Media Theory rather succinctly: “Media determine our situation, which—in spite of or because of it—deserves a description” (Kittler xxxix).

In Kittler’s German media theory, however, historical human subjects are radically displaced, so that, rather than imbuing both human and nonhuman actors with agency, “these [human] figures were at best proxies or avatars for Aufschreibesysteme or discourse networks composed of machinery, institutions, instruments, mathematical regimes, and inscriptions” (Geoghegan 67). Critical responses to Kittler’s media analysis include “the inability to speak to present technological media conditions” and “the inability or refusal to look beyond Western

contexts” or conceptions of culture (Geoghegan 68). The more recent turn to cultural techniques presents an answer to these dilemmas by focusing on the practices that link humans and media, showing how media determine our situation without undermining or favouring the human subject. To quote a useful definition by Cornelia Vismaan, cultural techniques

describe what media do, what they produce, and what kinds of actions they prompt. Cultural techniques define the agency of media and things. If media theory were, or had, a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs. Grammatical persons (and human beings alike) would then assume the place assigned for objects in a given sentence (“Cultural Techniques” 83).

Cultural techniques are a theoretical framework around which new theories of media are being built that favours neither operator nor media object. Rather, cultural techniques shift the perspective of media theory onto the operations that are performed by media, fostering “symbolic systems capable of articulating distinctions within and between cultures” (Geoghegan 67). Such distinctions could be as simple as the difference between inside and outside as articulated by the opening and closing function of a door (Siegert 192) or as complex as the drawing of a line in the ground to create legal systems which then inform distinctions between civilized and uncivilized worlds (Vismann “Cultural Techniques”). Thus, cultural techniques circumvent the constraints imposed on media history by linear time, “highlighting the operations or sequences of operations that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them” (Siegert qtd. in Geoghegan 69).
But how to recognize what is and is not a cultural technique? Rather than focus on “the goal” of an action, cultural techniques draw our attention to the “supporting agent” of a process (Vismann “Cultural Techniques” 87). “The execution of a particular act” becomes the locus of inquiry, moving away “from the executed act itself;” it is not the end that is interesting, but the means (ibid.). As Cornelia Vismann notes in her seminal text on cultural techniques, “Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty,”

To inquire about cultural techniques is not to ask about the feasibility, success, chances and risks of certain innovations and inventions in the domain of the subject. Instead, it is to ask about the self-management or auto-praxis [Eigenpraxis] of media and things, which determines the scope of the subject’s field of action. (84)

When Bernhard Siegert writes that cultural techniques describe operations or sequences of operations that precede the media concepts they generate, he is referring to certain practices that exist prior to and are constitutive of legal or cultural distinctions. So, before the institutionalization of ‘the law’, certain practices of division had to occur, such as the drawing of a line in the ground with a plough to mark the limits of a city (Vismann “Cultural Techniques” 83). Yet such an act is always already bound up within the conditions of the law, which brings me to a further definition of cultural techniques, that of their recursivity.

As Thomas Macho writes, cultural techniques involve “symbolic work,” that is, practices that are potentially self-referential (30). Drawing a line in the ground with a plough in order to mark the place where a city wall will be built is symbolic work, because it “serves to mark the
distinction between inside and outside” 2017-08-17 6:13 PM. Reading, writing, and arithmetic, understood as elementary cultural techniques, are also recursive, in that they are symbolic acts that are always already a reference to their existence as networks of signs. Not only are recursive processes self-referencing, they are also self-generating. The recursion loop, “with its ever more deeply nested iterations,

performs the same operation until it reaches a certain pre-determined state—the so-called termination condition—which is linked with yet another specific operation. Once this stage is reached, two possibilities open up: the process either comes to an end or—and therein lies the beauty of the model—works itself back to the start, by performing yet another, equally predetermined operation—in other words, going back, step by step, to the point of departure. But this is only possible since the recursion modifies itself with each new iteration, checking its current status at every given time. Thereby, it decides whether a new iteration is necessary or whether the termination condition has been finally met (Krajewski “Recursion”).

In media analysis, the recursive model makes it possible to make leaps across history, allowing for “a perspective on the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous; or, even more concisely, the recursive process is a method of retrospective anticipation” (Krajewski “Recursion”).

In the past decade, the possible applications of cultural techniques have begun to move outside of the interdisciplinary yet rather insular world of New German Media Theory. Questioning art in the Internet age requires new avenues of discourse, ones that take media into account in a different way than previously. In their conversation featured in the Summer two
thousand and fifteen issue of *Artforum*, Bernhard Siegert and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young discuss how Friedrich Kittler’s notion of *materiality* acts as the foundational concept of cultural techniques. Not to be confused with historical materialism, materiality in the Kittlerian sense points to media technologies that are “an abyss of non-sense” (GWY “Material World” 325). They are the “storage media, transmission media, processing media, and so on” that exist below “sense-making systems like hermeneutics and philosophy and pedagogy” (ibid.). These nonsensical materialities delegitimize “the tradition of Enlightenment and hermeneutic interpretation” by showing the dependence of these systems to such “spiritless” media (ibid.). Winthrop-Young and Siegert discuss how these materialities actually create the distinction between sense and non-sense, between meaning and non-meaning, how they, in other words *produce a difference*. Thus, it is possible to study how institutions and meaning systems come into being through recursive chains of operations performed by certain media.

To reiterate, an important distinguishing characteristic of cultural techniques is their recursivity. Essential to the process of creating difference is a technique’s ability of self-reference: “By referring to itself, the system opens up reference to the outside, makes itself observable from the outside… The system can make reference to the outside only by dealing with its own aesthetic properties” (Siegert qtd. in GWY “Material World” 326). Thus a medium can differentiate itself from what it is not. To illustrate this, Siegert uses the example of trompe l’oeil in fifteenth century Dutch still-life painting and what he calls the ‘Two-Fly Theorem’:

You have the one diegetic fly that is sitting somewhere on a table, clearly within the fictive space of the image, and then you have another fly, the partner, which produces the illusion that it sits on the image support itself. There is a constant oscillation between the
transparency of the illusionary pictorial space and the material opacity of the support.

(Artforum 326)

The second fly in the Dutch still-life sits outside the illusionary space of the image, indicating the use of trompe l’oeil in the space of the first fly, and thereby the inherent two-dimensionality of the picture plane as a page in an illuminated book.

Approaching art through cultural techniques allows for an opening up of Clement Greenberg’s idea of medium specificity. For Greenberg, a medium of art such as painting is at its purest form when it is able to “criticize and define itself” by remaining “unique to the nature of its medium” (Greenberg “Modernist Painting”). Greenberg sees Modernist painting as the epitome of this, as it calls attention to “the limits that constitute the medium of painting” by “stressing the ineluctable flatness of the surface” of the picture plane (Greenberg). The material constraints of the medium are expressed within the content itself. In this way, Modernist painting finds a way to recognize itself as painting, by referring to itself. What is depicted must first pass through the channel of its depiction; abstract painting will always have some type of referent, even if it is painting as such. In this way, painting “moves from signs to information,” depicting not content, but “the condition of the possibility of content” (Siegert qtd. in GWY “Material World” 332). The result is an abstracted image that nonetheless points to the ‘real’ despite its lack of iconography.

To return to Darboven, what I am analyzing is not the content of her art, for example, the century of cultural history that is thought to be the thesis of Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983. Rather, it is the techniques of communication with which I am concerned in this thesis. It is the signal and the noise, the positive and the negative forces that make up any relation by acting
recursively. Such transcendental concepts as history, time, and even the individual are all dependent on processes distinguishing them from that which they are not. This “difference is produced in the immanence of the world,” in the lines, numbers, and words that appear and reappear consistently throughout Darboven’s oeuvre (Siegert in GWY “Material World”). Here I am evoking French philosopher Michel Serres’ model of communication, which Bernhard Siegert employs in his book *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. Writing, according to Serres, is made up of both “essential graphic signs, those charged with meaning,” and “phenomena of interference that become obstacles to communication,” what he calls the “noise of graphic form” or “cacography” (66). Serres presents a trivalent model of communication that positions sender and receiver as “two interlocutors united against the phenomena of interference and confusion,” which is represented by a third man, “the parasite, the demon, the prosopopeia of noise” (67). As Serres writes, “to hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man” (67). Siegert extends this model to cultural techniques: “For Serres, then, communication is not primarily information exchange, appeal, or expression, but an act that creates order by introducing distinctions” (23). Darboven’s attention to the operations of writing, counting, and reading through her text formulations asks the viewer to rethink what constitutes silence and noise. The noise made by people must be filtered out by the noise of the text in order for silence—and rest—to finally be found.
Section IV: *schreibe, beschreibe nicht*

The text formulations listed above have been a component of Darboven’s artistic practice since at least nineteen seventy-five, when she began her work, *Schreibzeit*. The work was first completed in nineteen eighty-one and then later expanded with additions excerpted from other works (*Bismarckzeit* from nineteen seventy-eight, for example), a prologue and an epilogue, and sheets of notes and registers (Jussen *Hanne Darboven* 216). While *Schreibzeit* was first shown as an installation, taking on the floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall form for which the artist is well known, it is only fully viewable in its completed form as a book (ibid.). By virtue of its form, a thirty-two-volume book containing four thousand and twenty-five sheets of writing, and its publication by an institution for historical research, the Max Planck Institute for History, *Schreibzeit* imposes upon the viewer a different sort of constraint than what is encountered in the exhibition space. The overwhelming simultaneity of the style in which curators typically exhibit Darboven’s work is exchanged for the intimate pace of the turning of pages. The viewer must no longer compete with the literally insurmountable pages hung from the vertiginous heights of gallery walls. Instead, this newfound proximity to the work presents the viewer with an entirely new problem, that of the work’s absolute legibility. The repetition of Darboven’s “constructive principles” can no longer be dismissed as purely aesthetic (ibid.). Rather, the viewer becomes at the same time a *reader*, who must approach *Schreibzeit* as both an artwork *and* a “political-cultural-historical book” (Jussen *Schreibzeit* 15).

Darboven’s writing process is centred on the text formulation *writing without describing*. Before I can discuss the reading of Darboven’s work, which is in turn a necessary component of counting, I must first delve into Darboven’s writing process. After all, *Schreibzeit* is The Writing
of Time, but it is also The Time of Writing, the moment, *today (heute)*, in which writing is written.

To be able to write, “we need,” as Vilém Flusser explains in his essay “The Gesture of Writing,”

—among other things—the following: a surface (a piece of paper), a tool (a fountain pen), characters (letters), a convention (the meaning of the letters), rules (orthography), a system (grammar), a system that signifies the system of language (semantic knowledge of a language), a message to be written (ideas), and writing.

(20)

If all of these criteria are present, a text will presumably be legible to a reader who is not the author, as long as the reader also holds these criteria as necessary for writing itself. Yet even if the author and the reader do not share the same semantic knowledge of a language, the reader will still be able to recognize a written text, although the meaning of the words will be lost to them. The relationship between the writer and the reader is mediated by writing, the last item on Flusser’s list that needs no bracketed explanation. Writing requires writing in order to become a written, readable text. Writing is always already present within the gesture of writing, as the physical act of writing, the “scratching at a surface” in order to “in-scribe” words, pictures, or designs upon it is an inherently human—that is, intuitive—gesture (19). On the other hand, the cultural purpose of writing must be learned through the institutionally and socially imposed cultural technique of traditional, language-based literacy.
As Bernard Geoghegan notes in his essay concerning cultural techniques as media theory, “to term literacy a cultural technique is to underscore that reading and culture are cultivated and bring forth a certain kind of subject and a certain kind of society through the learning of rote procedures of selection, processing, and reproduction” (Geoghegan 2013). This understanding of literacy depends on language; the languages that are stored in a human’s mind inform their very being as a subject of society, “for each [language] throws [a subject] into its own universe” (Flusser 22). Of course, there is a clear difference between spoken and written language; a person who is considered illiterate by society can still speak and communicate in the language(s) in which they were raised, without any knowledge of that language’s grammatical and orthographical rules. As such, written language is not the recording of speech, just as “the transcription of a sound recording is not written text,” at least in the sense of writing as the realization of “the words of a language whispered sotto voce” (Flusser 23). This is what is thought to separate literacy and orality, that writing must be composed of phonetic signs arranged in a particular order for it to be considered writing.

When discussing how literacy—the ability to read and write—creates distinctions between cultures, it is common practice among media theorists to tell the story of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “A Writing Lesson.” As Geoffrey Winthrop-Young observes, Lévi-Strauss’s short anecdote is a dramatic staging of the “gap that separates orality from literacy” (“Timely Matters” 5). For Lévi-Strauss, the incident sparks a reflection on origin and purpose of writing, centering on his hypothesis that the “primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery” (299). Lévi-Strauss assigns an “enslaving violence” to “total literacy” (Derrida 132), concluding that the “fight against illiteracy” is a method of subjugating populations to the law by ensuring that none are ignorant to its letter (Lévi-Strauss 300). The chief of the Nambikwara tribe
understands the implicit power of “the white man’s weapons, pencil and paper” (Vismann *Files* 2). Winthrop-Young likens the incident to a colonial version of Original Sin, in which the “intruding anthropologist [is] a literate serpent threatening a paradise of pristine orality by offering the toxic temptation of writing” (“Timely Matters” 5). Further iterations of the story appear in Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and Cornelia Vismann’s *Files*. Derrida reads the story as a “parable” that contains “all the organic complexity of writing” (126), arguing that writing is already known to the Nambikwara despite its nonphonetic quality. And finally, Vismann takes Derrida’s deconstruction a step further, showing how the story is actually an *ur*-example of the basic administrative procedure of list making (*Files* 7).

The story appears in the twenty-eighth chapter of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*, a chronicle of the anthropologist’s time among the indigenous tribes of Brazil, in this case with the Nambikwara people. As “A Writing Lesson” has been retold many times, and as the copying-out of texts was central to Darboven’s reading process, an additional retelling of the story would surely not go amiss.

In an effort to estimate the size of the Nambikwara population, Lévi-Strauss (between numerous mishaps in the bush and an incident with a rogue mule) persuaded representatives of various families to gather together in order to conduct a census. Though according to Lévi-Strauss it is “unnecessary to point out that the Nambikwara have no written language” he nevertheless handed out sheets of paper and pencils. At first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy, horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing or, to be more
accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way I did mine…. The majority did this and no more, but the chief had further ambitions. No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing. So he asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap out from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face. But he never admitted this, and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher; his verbal commentary followed almost at once, relieving me of the need to ask for explanations. (296)

The chief attempts to communicate with the anthropologist through the writing of wavy lines, but this exchange must be supplemented with verbal communication in order for meaning to be transmitted (Vismann *Files* 3). It is not until later in the story that the wavy lines take on their own meaning, separate from the phonetic writing system Lévi-Strauss assumes the Nambikwara are only imitating. After the anthropologist hands out the gifts he has promised, the chief took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects I was to give in exchange for the presents offered to me: so-and-so was to have a chopper in exchange for a bow and arrows, someone else beads in exchange for his necklace…. This farce went on for two hours. Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to
astonish his companions, to convince them that he was acting as an intermediary agent for
the exchange of goods, that he was in alliance with the white man and shared his secrets.

(296)

The chief’s second show of writing is a “farce” only in the sense that his wavy lines do not
correspond to speech, and therefore cannot be considered writing.

Claiming that the Nambikwara have no written language is an ethnocentrism by Derrida’s
standards:

By radically separating language from writing, by placing the latter below and outside,
believing at least that it is possible to do so, by giving oneself the illusion of liberating
linguistics from all involvement with written evidence, one thinks in fact to restore the
status of authentic language, human and fully signifying language, to all languages
practiced by *peoples whom one nevertheless continues to describe as “without writing.”*

(120, emphasis in original)

Lévi-Strauss stresses the apparent fact that the chief is “making a show” of reading from his list
of items (296). Indeed, how could he ‘read’ such writing, devoid as it is of any signifier of
spoken words? Despite this handicap, the chief carries on reading from his list, unaware that
Lévi-Strauss is only humouring his childish endeavour. We as readers are to assume that it is the
indigenous chief receiving the “writing lesson” from the white interloper and not the other way
around. Lévi-Strauss frames this incident as an instance of literacy imposing itself upon orality,
prompting his (and Derrida’s) reflection on the association of writing with “the exploitation of man by man” (Derrida 119).

What to make then of Darboven’s wavy lines, which she insists are “real writing” (Lippard “Deep in Numbers”)? These lines appear throughout her oeuvre, from her earliest constructions to the final repetitions (See Fig. 4, 5, 6, and 7). At times they take up entire pages or panels, while at others they serve as an indication of the continuation of her process, appearing at the top of a page of written-out numbers or calculations (Fig. 6 and 7). As in the Nambikwara’s “drawing lines,” Darboven uses wavy, horizontal lines in lieu of conventional phonetic writing (Derrida 123). Is it not already problematic to say that writing is nonphonetic, as if writing is by default language-based? Is it not more appropriate to say that this wavy writing is the ‘writing’ required by writing in order to become writing? By comparing the wavy lines of the Nambikwara with those of Darboven, a form of writing can be conceptualized that lies outside of the criteria outlined by Flusser, without falling into the trap of “an ethnocentrism thinking itself as anti-ethnocentrism” (Derrida 120).

Rather than feigning phonetic writing, I argue that the Nambikwara are practicing what Darboven calls “writing as quiet as pencil and paper as writing is writing” –or– “writing writing” –or– simply “‘it’” (Fig. 2). They are not without writing, nor are they inhabitants of a world of pure orality, for that world does not exist. Though all accounts of “A Writing Lesson” focus on the actions of the chief, he is not the only Nambikwara to perform the gesture of writing. As Cornelia Vismann observes, only he turns the gesture into the technique of compiling lists (5), but, initially, it is “the majority” of the group that sets to works writing wavy lines (Lévi-Strauss 296). They are all participating in the ritual of writing without describing that also appears in
Darboven’s oeuvre as wavy lines. It is as if, divorced from the constraints of language, writing is able to perform itself on the paper.
Section V: schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben

“It”—what Darboven also calls “liberal writing—number—‘date’—numbers”—is writing before the constraints of content have been applied (Fig. 2). I have now established that writing need not contain phonetic signs in order to be considered writing. Hanne Darboven’s mysterious wavy script is “a ritual re-enactment… of writing,” the writing of writing itself (Fer 205). Like the ur-writing of the Nambikwara, Darboven’s wavy script is the cultural technique of writing at its most basic level. However, not even Darboven can fully escape language in her writing without describing. Indeed, Darboven’s textual formulations themselves are written in both English and German, while Schreibzeit contains over three hundred and fifty quoted passages assembled together from “the reservoir of leftist intellectual reflection during the nineteen seventies” (Jussen Hanne Darboven 216). If “Darboven hates to read and loves to write,” calling for the reading of Schreibzeit seems rather contradictory (Lippard “Deep in Numbers”). Darboven writes “and no more words / i like to write / i don’t like to read,” and yet reading persists.

Words are a problem for Darboven. They cannot be avoided, and so they must be subverted. She goes about this in two ways: First, she gives the operation of counting a narrative function, where what is being said resembles lines of digital code more closely than a traditional story. She writes negative space with numbers, filling the void with the absence of content. This is schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben (writing counting and counting writing). Second, and most significantly, she uses the tautological gesture of the gedankenstrich to enable the negation of reading while still allowing it to perform its function as a cultural technique of spatial orientation. Implicit in this is her copying-out of canonical texts, which are ‘written’ only in the
sense that they are inscribed onto the paper. If the wavy lines are real writing, the orthographic symbols making up the text formulations and the copied-out passages are writing’s neutralization.

What is written in the thirty-two-volume book *Schreibzeit* is not ‘readable’ in any traditional sense. Among critics, opinions on how to read Darboven’s writing are inconclusive. Elke Bippus maintains that

Darboven’s labor/activity of writing establishes a space that prescribes no specific reading direction, but instead presents itself as a shapable, heterogeneous space that is open to a variety of modes of perception, one that renounces the authoritarian character of predetermined interpretation. (188)

On the other hand, Lucy Lippard sees a kind of linear structure in Darboven’s ‘texts’:

Most of Darboven’s works are drawings, but she does not permit the eye to swim all over the surface. Even if one understands nothing about the numbers one is reading…one is still reading, left to right, horizontally, or in the case of the indices—in columns. (“Deep in Numbers”)

Both critics stress that the readability of a text is dependent on a particular directional quality. In her assertion that Darboven’s writing “prescribes no specific reading direction” because of its eschewal of “predetermined interpretation,” Bippus assumes that readability is predicated upon the existence of a narrative arc. Darboven’s writing is devoid of narrative content, but by using
numbers and grids, the artist maintains the traditional structure and tempo of a text, mimicking the ‘feeling’ of reading.

In order to be read, texts must follow a “specific linearity” (Flusser 20). The direction of this linearity is of course dependent on where in the world a text originates, and, consequently, the language in which it is written. In the occidental program, in which Hanne Darboven’s work is entrenched, this linear perspective involves a movement of the eye from left to right. A text must start at the upper left-hand corner of a page and continue in a horizontal line towards the right margin, before doubling back to the left and down a line, and so on. In the Arabic language, for example, this movement is reversed, with a text starting at the right margin and continuing ‘backwards’ to the left. This simple fact may appear to contradict the previous assertion that writing can still be writing without language, for the linearity of a text seems to depend on its syntactic structure. Yet perhaps it is the other way around, and the format of a text, which can be seen as adhering to a place-value-system, exists a priori of the language in which a given text is written. The cultural technique of reading, then, is not solely a cerebral act dependent on grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, but is at the same time “a physical technique based on a spatial system of orientation that uses the body of the reader as its point of reference” (Siegert 26). This is achieved in Darboven’s work through the writing-out of numbers using orthographic symbols from the Latin alphabet, which are able to stand in for the absence of narrative text.

With the reader as its point of reference, a text acts like a perspectival grid in a painting, directing the eye towards a point on a two-dimensional surface that gives the illusion of depth. As Bernhard Siegert writes, “the only position a reading subject can assume vis-à-vis a printed text is the same that a viewing subject assumes vis-à-vis a perspectival picture” (27). In his analysis of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq’s discovery and subsequent copying-out of the Res gestae
*divi augusti* (the account of the deeds of the emperor Augustus written in his own hand), Siegert shows how the layout of a text can supplement information that is not present. The *Res gestae* was badly damaged when Busbecq found it on the wall of a temple in the year fifteen fifty-five, causing much of the inscription to be unreadable. Busbecq described these missing portions of the texts as “gaps,” spaces from which information is missing (Siegert 27). But in the print version of the text from fifteen seventy-nine edited by Andreas Schott, the ‘missing’ portions of the *Res gestae* are represented as “an ocean of dots” that nevertheless follow the line-by-line logic of a written text (Siegert 25-27). Thus the text becomes legible despite its deficiencies through the addition of non-signifying placeholders:

Schott’s dots uncover for all the world to see what in the case of undisturbed textual communication remains hidden: that by making use of a parasitical (supplementary) carrier, the text refers to a symbolic order based on a place-value system…Place-value systems are codes that take into account the media employed to store and transmit them. The channel, the parasite, is not *supplementary*, but *the ground* for the operationality of numerals. Digits are signs that can be absent from their place (as opposed to Roman numerals, which cannot be absent from their place as they have no place value). In turn, the dots introduced by Schott as signs for missing textual units are invisibly present in every letter, and only become visible when the latter is missing. Just as the invention of zero allows us to write the absence of a digit, Schott’s dot is an invention that allows us to write the absence of a letter, thereby turning real gaps into a set of discrete, countable elements. (27)
By “gazing through” Schott’s non-signifying dots, the printed text becomes visible despite the fact that most of it has been destroyed (27). The dots occupy the position of the third in Michael Serres’s formulation, creating a channel of noise through which information is then allowed to pass. According to Siegert’s reading, the dots are always already present in the text, and only appear when the text itself is absent. Absence is thus made countable, negation given empirical value.

Counting as a recursive technique of making absence visible is a central component of Darboven’s practice. Early on in her artistic career, Darboven began to use numbers and grids as placeholders for words. Due to the fact that the artist’s calculations are derived from place-value system of the Gregorian calendar (dd.mm.yyyy), this practice is typically described as the “explicit visualization of the passage of time that is inherent to the act of writing” (Ebers 23). The K-value (short for Konstruktion) is obtained by adding together any given date of a year, with the values of the century omitted and values of the year taken as individual numbers. So for the year nineteen seventy-one, the first of January would be \(1 + 1 + 7 + 1 = 10K\), while December thirty-first would appear as \(31 + 12 + 7 + 1 = 51K\). However, this formula should not be taken as a proof for Darboven’s system, as the method and frequency of its application is fully arbitrary and only repeatable by the artist herself.

Darboven therefore seeks to abolish linear time, taking whole spans of years and consolidating them into a simultaneous mass. In a work like Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983, the artist claims to represent entire centuries in a limited amount of panels and frames. Her works are apparently preoccupied with the impossible task of representing the “unrepresentable idea” of time in the Kantian sense of the sublime (Felix 19). But calendrical time, like language, is a mere invention that Darboven manipulates to suit her own ends. As Bettina Carl observes,
“Darboven’s counting-writing…approaches the actual sensation of the temporal as a plurality of dimensions” (48). The work Ein Jahrhundert-ABC [One Century ABC] (1970-71) does not aim to represent one century, but rather to maintain a structural template in which numbers stand in for the content of a text:

The primary material of her constructions 2K – 61K, which are based on the dates between 1.1.00 and 31.13.99, constitute nineteen sequences of forty-two parts, ranging from 2K – 43K to 20K – 61K. Like the nineteen sequences, the forty-two sheets that make up Ein Jahrhundert-ABC represent placeholders for single instances of value within the system, which are themselves indifferent to both the material that produces them and to the frequency of the value itself (Hanne Darboven Retrospective 208).

The work Ein Jahrhundert-ABC (Fig. 3) can be read as the embodiment of schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben, as it shows that Darboven’s wavy writing is simultaneously a way of writing against interpretation and a method of counting the spaces on a page in the form of a text. There is a clear correlation between the ‘time-based’ K-value and Darboven’s so-called u-lines. In Figure Three, the value 2K corresponds to two upward strokes of script, 3K is equal to three strokes, 4K to four, and so on, with each line containing a maximum of ten strokes. The line then jumps to the next row, just as a line of printed text would, expanding in value until ten strokes are again completed. Thus, the viewer reads both the individual drawings and the entire panel as they would a text, beginning in the upper left-hand corner and ending in the bottom right, so that panel-text ends with 43K and forty-three corresponding upward strokes, broken down into four lines of ten and one line of three.
In a letter to Sol LeWitt from October sixth, nineteen seventy-three, Darboven writes: “and even i have to use dates now by using them — ironical — but as i wrote to you, SOL, season follows season / creates ‘it’” (Fig. 2). “It”—writing writing—is created over natural time, the passing of seasons, through the use of artificial time, calendrical dates. The irony in this “corresponds to an awareness of the medium at work within the message (to recall Marshall McLuhan), the message being an emphatic notion of history” (Ernst 52). Regardless of whether her message is understood, the viewer is fully aware that the numbers Darboven is using are in fact “coproducers” of her message (ibid.). The histories and stories (Geschichten) Hanne Darboven tells are not narrated as literature, but processed as data.

If Darboven is writing history, she is doing so outside of all historiographical convention. In his essay “Telling Versus Counting,” media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst comes very close to describing Darboven’s particular kind of ‘historical’ writing. To open up a discussion of the cultural practice of digital coding, Ernst proposes a recursive look at medieval annalism, which, like an algorithm in digital coding, “also stands for a writing aesthetics of organizing a sequence of events in serial, sequential order” (150). As Bernhard Jussen notes, Darboven’s artistic practice “has regularly evoked associations with the Middle Ages among interpreters. Darboven is said to have worked ‘like a medieval annalist’ or is perceived as being ‘herself medieval in appearance” (quoting Klaus Honnef and Anselm Haerkamp in Hanne Darboven 216). The labour of medieval monks finds its resurrection in Darboven’s practice, through the genres of florilegium—the copying-out of texts, computus—the cyclical calculation of the calendar to determine important holidays, and chronicle—the arrangement of historical events in chronological order without a coherent narrative (Jussen Geschichte schreiben 17). How
counting functions as a way of non-narrative storytelling in Darboven’s work can be better grasped with a closer look at Ernst’s media archaeology.

Ernst begins with the etymology of the verb *to tell*:

*To tell*, we learn, as a transitive verb, means not only “to give live account in speech or writing of events or facts” (that is, *to tell a story*) but also “to count things” (*to tell a rosary*), for example. The very nature of digital operations and telling thus coincide…

The old English *tellan* derives from a prehistoric Germanic word meaning “to put in order” (both in narration and counting). (148)

In medieval Germany, telling and counting were understood to be much closer in meaning. The affinities between telling and counting are still inherent in the German verb *erzählen*, meaning *to tell* or *to narrate*, as it also contains the verb *zählen*, meaning *to count*. But, as Ernst points out, the medieval German definition of *erzählen* “originally meant counting in a sequential order” (149). Narrated and counted time were read together as “sequential notions of temporal events with no metahistorical, narrative prefiguration” (149).

Telling encompasses a “non-literary and paratactic mode” that is best exemplified in the form of the list. Lists, to recall Cornelia Vismann’s reading of the Nambikwara chief’s compiling of items,

conform neither to orality nor to literacy. They represent nonphonetic writing; they are a nonsyntactic formation of items. Repeating or enumerating items is said to have produced
the alphabet, that is, the alphanumerical writing system in which letters function as numerals. *(Files 5)*

Lists are “nonsyntactic” because they depend on “the spatial logic of *place value systems*” *(Vismann Files 7)*. They have a predetermined order into which information can be inserted and therefore do not depend on narrative coherence. Telling history for a medieval annalist meant writing events in the order they occurred, simply leaving gaps for the times in which nothing was recorded. The medieval annalist did not follow the modern anthropological impulse to “link unconnected, contingent experience into narrative wholes” *(Ernst 151)*, but would instead write a date and beside it, a name or shorthand account of an event, no matter how ‘significant’. Annals thus take the form of “a list of entries but also of non-entries, empty storage spaces that provide gaps for reading, silence as statement” *(149)*.

Like calendar dates, which can be written-out in letters or in numbers, Darboven’s textual formulation *schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben* also has its numerical equivalent: \(1 + 1 \Rightarrow 1, 2\) — \(2 - 2 \Rightarrow 1, 2\). This formula is also written out in letters and often spoken aloud by the artist in interviews as “eins plus eins ist comma zwei / zwei ist einszwei” (“one plus one is one comma two / two is onetwo”). Darboven also designed a stamp containing this ‘equation’ *(Fig. 4)*. The equation goes around the outer portion of the circular stamp, while the abbreviation “e.t.c.” resides in the middle. The inclusion of “e.t.c’ here is ironic, as the notion of *etcetera* usually denotes “the capacity to abbreviate, to adumbrate, to condense, to be able to imply an expansion with only the first two or three terms, to cover vast arithmetic spaces with a few ellipsis points” *(Krauss 55)*. Yet there is no mathematical reduction in this formula, no possible simplification to the lowest common denominator, nor does it correlate in any discernable way to Darboven’s K-
value equation. Rather, everything is laid out without abbreviation, so that “the parts and the whole are included in the whole” (Ebers 25). Darboven’s formulations are tautological, what is absent is always contained in what is present, and these elements are synchronized like notes in a harmonic chord.

Hanne Darboven’s work is most assuredly full of dates and empty spaces. She writes seemingly significant dates, like the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre (21.6.1905), and then in turn writes that date in the various forms of her Konstruktionen, as grids, as numerals, and as written-out numbers. Or, she writes a span of time without any events, filling the page with negative space. Page twenty of Schreibzeit (Fig. 5), bearing a wavy line, a drawn out line, and Drucksache (Printed Matter) in the header, is a chronicle of the time span between the first of January nineteen seventy five (1.1.1975) and the seventeenth of that same month and year (17.1.1975). But, for whatever reason, there are no calculations for these dates, only the punctuated words “—von—bis—;” and “—weiter—: hier.—;” and then a blank space until the pagination at the bottom of the page. Von—bis denotes a period of time, for example ‘von morgens bis abends’, meaning ‘from morning to night’. Viewers are invited to “project their own visions (letters, images) into the voids” between the dates at the top of the page and the space below (Ernst 149). What happens von one side of the line bis the other is supplied by the viewer’s memory of Darboven’s previous pages, until we run into another tautology. Weiter—hier (literally ‘onwards—here’) implies static movement, a going-on while staying put, which is the very essence of Darboven’s insular working world.

Counting thus becomes a way of organizing writing around something other than a sequential narrative. Rather than deriving from a transcendental notion of time, Hanne Darboven’s calculations are based on the numbers that make up calendrical operations. The
numbers that form calendrical dates and enable both the measurement and the conceptualization of time exist “within the immanence of the world” (Siegert *Artforum* 329). They “can hardly be linked to anything exceeding their mutual relations” because they are not time as such, but the operations that enable the distinction between past, present, and future (Carl 48). The notion of a year begins to blur, becoming just a detail of an unknown quantity to register, or none/ by using our math, system to make or to speculate years (backward → history → existence!) is and is no more, was never / taking further relations to time with this known system time compensates time, time neutralizes time / No time at all / Time total / Within my limitation will have my stuff written as many times as possible / always writing / it’s impossible. (Darboven qtd. in Lippard “Deep in Numbers”)

Numbers in Darboven’s work stand-in for time, but they are not time. Time is an “unrepresentable idea” that can never be adequately represented on the page except in the figuration of its absence (Felix 19). Darboven’s countable writing is not the “visualization of the passage of time” (Honnef 9), but the visualization of the operations that enable time to be represented in the first place.
Section VI: *gedankenstrich*

Of the three elementary cultural techniques that operate within Hanne Darboven’s work, reading is the most ambiguous. Unlike writing and counting, reading is not inherently recursive—it must be learned through the intervention of institutionalized education. In order to thematize reading, another device is necessary: tautology. In a sense, the tautological gesture in Darboven’s work and the recursive process described by theorists of cultural techniques are one and the same: writing *refers to itself* as writing, thereby showing itself as an operation and also refuting itself in its repetition, over and over again. Reading is a problem for Darboven because it is *not* simultaneous; a narrated text cannot be grasped as a totality because it is sequential, that is, dependent on that which has come before and that which comes after. If it seems like a contradiction to claim that Darboven’s goal is the abolishment of time in favour of simultaneity while also putting forward the idea that her writing has a readable, linear trajectory, this feeling is not incorrect. Darboven’s work concerns the contradiction of attempting a refutation of time by remaining within the moment of contemplation, while simultaneously knowing that such a refutation is impossible. The tautological gesture enables Darboven to “search into something between everything for a time while time is going on” (the artist, quoted in Lippard “Deep in Numbers”). This is achieved through the act of crossing-out, in which the act of copying-out texts is embedded and which is represented by the textual formulation of the *gedankenstrich*.

Infidels claim that the rule in the Library is not “sense, but “non-sense,” and that “rationality” (even humble, pure coherence) is an almost miraculous expectation. They speak, I know, of “the feverish Library, whose random volumes constantly threaten to transmogrify into others, so that they affirm all things, deny all things,
and confound and confuse all things, like some mad and hallucinating deity.”

Those words, which not only proclaim disorder but exemplify it as well, prove, as all can see, the infidel’s deplorable taste and desperate ignorance.\footnote{This passage and all subsequent extracted passages in Section VI are taken from Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel” \textit{Collected Fictions}. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998. pp. 117-118. Here, I am intentionally imitating Rosalind Krauss’s presentation of passages from Samuel Beckett’s \textit{Malloy} in her essay on the art of Sol LeWitt, “LeWitt in Progress.”}

Many of Darboven’s textual formulations have an intrinsic tautological structure that is often lost when they are translated into English. In \textit{schreibe, beschreibe nicht}, the verb “to write” (\textit{schreiben}) is contained in the verb “to describe” (\textit{beschreiben}). Likewise in the formulation \textit{schreibe rechnen/rechne schreiben}: because Darboven writes all her formulations in the lower case, \textit{rechnen} and \textit{schreiben} could mean the verbs “to count” and “to write,” while they could just as easily refer to the nouns \textit{Rechnen}, meaning arithmetic, and \textit{Schreiben}, writing in the substantive. Choosing to write German words in the lower case is an act of subversion in itself, as it erases the existence of all proper nouns, which are always capitalized. These tautologies show reading’s inherent discrepancies, how easily meaning can be misconstrued. However, while these formulations show how reading is subverted in Darboven’s work, this negation is not perfectly simultaneous. The \textit{gedankenstrich} is where reading is finally undermined while at the same time displayed as an operation.

For while the Library contains all verbal structures, all the variations allowed by twenty-five orthographic symbols, it includes not a single piece of absolute nonsense. It would be pointless to observe that the finest volume of all the many hexagons that I myself administer is titled \textit{Combed Thunder}, while another is titled \textit{The Plaster Cramp}, and another \textit{Axaxaxas mlö}. Those phrases, at first
apparently incoherent, are undoubtedly susceptible to cryptographic or allegorical “reading”; that reading, that justification of the words’ order and existence, is itself verbal and, ex hypothesis, already contained somewhere in the Library.

The Gedankenstrich in Hanne Darboven’s work appears both as a written-out word and as drawn out line. As a line, it negates Darboven’s ur-text, which can be seen on the first page of Schreibzeit (Fig. 6). Klaus Krüger dedicates a significant amount of his text “Die Zeit der Schrift—Medien und Metapher in der Schreibzeit” to an analysis of the “double-coding” implicit in the first few pages of the work (49). The first page of Schreibzeit is referenced with a Zero, implying that it is both the beginning and not the beginning of the work. Likewise, the title of the page, kalenderaufzeichnungen-eintragungen, contains two words that mean essentially the same thing: Aufzeichnung, meaning a written account or record, and Eintragung, meaning a listed record (Krüger 49). This page is also filled with lines of wavy script that are all crossed-out, yet remaining on the page, as if they were a fully-completed to-do list. Similarly, as Krüger observes, the actual page ‘one’ of Band Three of Schreibzeit (Fig. 7) is also full of tautologies encircling each other. In the top left-hand corner, there is a dedication: “An: jedermann.” Beside this dedication, the calculations of four weekdays from the third week in January, nineteen seventy-five are written, with the word amburgberg underneath. Schreibzeit is addressed to everyone and it has come straight from Hanne Darboven herself, who has included her own address on the page, written perpendicular to the horizon: Am Burgberg 26. Yet she has not included a mailing address for “jedermann,” leaving the question of how we are to access this work unanswered. The pagination in the bottom right hand corner reads 1), but in the bottom left, this pagination is also negated with a line. The page, as Klaus Krüger observes, also contains a single, wavy line and a drawn out line in the header, the basic elements that make up the
opposing page “Zero” (49). Beside the Absender, also written at a ninety-degree angle, is the word gedankenstrich, which has a line going straight through the middle, like so: gedankenstrich.

This word gedankenstrich appears across Darboven’s oeuvre wherever the artist is writing, sometimes freestanding, but usually crossed-out. It is often followed with (+e), indicating the possibility of a plurality of dashes, as the suffix –e would turn ein Gedankenstrich into zwei oder mehr [two or more] Gedankenstriche. The German word “Gedankenstrich” translates to the English word “dash;” it is a mark of punctuation, a hyphen. In its everyday usage, the Gedankenstrich would never appear written out in letters, but only as the symbol “—”. Speaking the word aloud, however, brings more associations to mind than its orthographic function. Translated literally into English, Gedankenstrich means “thought-line.” Part of its function is to signify a train of thought, a pause for reflection, a transition from one idea to the next. Yet the word “Strich” may also be translated as “stroke” or “streak,” implying a much more active force than the word “line.” A stroke-of-thought signifies genius, a “Eureka” moment of discovery that can never be repeated in exactly the same way twice. Though the Gedankenstrich may designate the singularity of a thought, the symbol it signifies is ubiquitous—and infinitely repeatable. The Gedankenstrich is a mark of indeterminateness. It allows for information that is un-writeable to be referenced on the page; it is the passing of an undisclosed amount of time; it is the space where the mumbling, stuttering, and babbling of the human mind finds refuge in a text.

There is no combination of characters one can make—dhcmrlchtj, for example—that the divine Library has not already foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can
speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god.

The multivocality of *gedankenstrich* in Hanne Darboven’s work is not limited to its etymology. When the word is written-out, it already subverts its function as a pause for contemplation by the force of its having to be read. To rectify this, Darboven doubles back, crossing out *gedankenstrich* with what can be seen as another Gedankenstrich: *gedankenstrich*. The tautological complication of the *gedankenstrich* crossed-out with another iteration of itself brings to mind Derrida’s notion of the “philosophical line of difference,” which he refers to as “Being *sous rature*” or the “*traee*” (Silverman 149, 156). For Derrida, being “under erasure” is “to write a word, cross it out, then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out, since it is necessary, it remains legible)” (Spivak xiv). This structure is the marking “of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (Spivak xvii). However, I do not wish to delve too deeply into Derrida’s conceptualization of the line of difference, as that would require a different methodology than the one I have put forth. Furthermore, I do not see Darboven’s *gedankenstrich* as fitting perfectly under Derrida’s *sous rature*. As I discuss in Section V, Darboven is indeed concerned with the writing of absence and presence on the page. The gedankenstrich-as-drawn-out-line also frequently crosses out the word *heute*. But rather than indicate the absence of a “being-present” (Spivak xvi), *heute* is the literal nullification of the *present*, the negation of the time being. The line of difference in *gedankenstrich* is not so much an indication of the word’s inaccuracy/necessity as it is a repetition of a word with the goal of literally negating the word’s meaning.
To speak is to commit tautologies. The pointless, verbose epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons—as does its refutation. (A number \( n \) of the possible languages employ the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol “library” possesses the correct definition “everlasting, ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries,” while a library—the thing—is a loaf of bread or a pyramid or something else, and the six words that define it themselves have other definitions. You who read me—are you sure you understand my language?)

Through tautological repetition, the operation of reading is simultaneously performed and rejected. As I explain above, when Hanne Darboven copies out a text by another author, she is doing so in the tradition of a medieval annalist practicing florilegium, the writing-out and presentation of texts without comment or annotation. Schreibzeit includes quotations from poetic as well as theoretical texts, from Baudelaire to Sartre, Enzensberger to Lichtenberg. These passages are almost never altered and are reproduced, by hand, as they were written, although usually in the German translation. This copying-out is not done out of reverence, nor is it a feminist outcry against the absence of the canonical female. As Lucy Lippard observes, Darboven must write in order to read. When she was still feeling the pressures of life in New York City, Darboven “began reading-writing Homer’s Odyssey instead of making all the work decisions confronting her. She wrote 500 pages of it, very small, the same size as the paperback from which she copied” (“Deep in Numbers”). As in the quote from Borges’ “The Library of Babel” reproduced in this section, the reading of texts through their copying-out is itself a tautology. What is spoken (or written) already exists elsewhere in another iteration. All possible recursions are always already present within the operation of reading. It is only a matter of their being called upon and written-out, a process which then nullifies their existence. This could be
achieved with any text, but is reducible, so to speak, to the gedankenstrich. The thought-line—the pause—is drawn through with yet another pause, cancelling out the moment of contemplation with an active gesture and allowing the work to go on.

Residing in this moment of contemplation or prolonging, to recall Rosalind Krauss, “the brilliance of the idea” (58), is blatantly irrational. Nothing is achieved and nothing is gained, but the progress of the work in and of itself. Briony Fer ends her book The Infinite Line with a quote from a nineteen ninety-four interview with Hanne Darboven: “Day in, day out, we deal with the sense and nonsense of things” (211). On page two-hundred and thirty-six of Band Four of Schreibzeit, which also includes a list of text formulations, the artist reproduces an aphorism of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: “One cannot deny that the word nonsense, if spoken with the appropriate nose and voice, concedes little or nothing, even to the words chaos and eternity. One feels a shock, if my senses do not deceive me, which arises from a fuga vacui of human understanding” (62). In every instance of communication, there will always be noise—cacography—that a signal must pass through. But how can one differentiate between signal and noise, between sense and non-sense? What if what is being communicated is in fact nonsense, which must be filtered out of pages and pages of ostensibly rational material? If non-sense, following Borges, is already contained within all possible iterations of the so-called Library, then sense and non-sense amount to zero.

13 Quoted in Schreibzeit as: “Es ist nicht zu läugnen [sic], dass das Wort Nonsense, wenn es mit Nase und Stimme ausgesprochen wird, etwas hat, das selbst den Wörtern Chaos und Ewigkeit wenig oder nichts nachgibt. Man fühlt eine Erschütterung die wo mich meine Empfindung nicht betrügt von einer fuga vacui des menschlichen Verstandes herrührt.”
Section VII: Conclusion – You and Me in Time

Critics often portray the tautological mode in Hanne Darboven’s work as a feeling of eternal repetition. Because her tautologies imply that everything is already contained within the work, her numerical constructions seem as if “they were also extensible to infinity” (van Bruggen, 71). Briony Fer also sees Darboven’s project as endless: “Eternity is a transcendental concept outside time. Infinity for Darboven is a temporal concept—understood as an interminable project of writing” (205). Darboven’s writing goes on and on, and with it, her project grows in time and in size, seemingly forever. But “infinite” is just a word, and the writing of time into infinity is not Darboven’s primary objective. What is learned with each recursion is that, to once again reference Borges,

it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in some remote place or places the corridors and staircases and hexagons may, inconceivably, end—which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of possible books is not” (Collected 118).

Though the pages of Darboven’s books number in the tens of thousands, they are, in fact, limited. They may only repeat within themselves, in a recursive loop that will always end at the beginning and that is infinite only in the way a circle is infinite. It goes on and on, but remains closed.

Hanne Darboven’s relationship with writing is first and foremost one of action, in which the process of writing takes visual precedence over content, working against interpretation and
through every possible iteration. This process is not a mathematical proof, but an irrational repetition of a single obsession. In a review of a Hanne Darboven exhibition from nineteen seventy-one, Lucy Lippard recognizes how closely the artist is tied to her writing process:

For all the detachment implied by the use of systems, Darboven is closer to her art than any artist I can think of. The work comes from inside, from the artist’s own needs and compulsions, which explains its mesmeric sincerity and vigor. (Six Years 216)

It is the limits of what can be done in the world (and with the word) that make it so real and so frightening (See Fig. 1). Writing is for Hanne Darboven a method of remaining within the process of her art production. She goes on repeating her closed system, in which she isolates herself from the rest of the world. As Isabelle Graw observes, the viewer is drawn into this flurry of activity and compelled to reproduce it. Of her time spent researching Darboven, Graw writes:

… I found myself lapsing into a mode of action that anthropologist René Girard describes as “mimetic rivalry.” I appropriated Darboven’s gesture of writing, as if to compete with her, and myself wrote out by hand those of her retranscribed sentences that seemed important to me. My writing increasingly came to resemble hers. (250)

I too have followed the irresistible impulse to mimic Hanne Darboven’s gesture of writing, to find a way to keep her close to me. My notebooks are filled with imitations of her writing, all of them dated with the time of their reappearance by the hand of another. I have traced her process from her farmhouse on the estate Am Burgberg, where her goats still reside amidst her many
relics and treasures, to the streets of New York City, where she first devised a system that would marry silence with noise. I have retreated to the country as she did. To find out how to read Darboven’s secret, it was necessary to seek isolation from the chaos of the everyday, to leave the world of politics, culture, and history behind, if just for a moment.

In Walter Smerling’s nineteen ninety-one documentary on the Hanne Darboven’s work and life, Mein Geheimnis ist, daß ich keins habe, the artist reiterates what she expressed to Lucy Lippard in Artforum in nineteen seventy-two about the calmness of the writing process: “…I would say, after the unrest of war, death, and fascism, that silence [Ruhe] is the highest matter of interest that one can practice.”14 Practicing silence for Darboven means exposing the systems in all things that are constructed (which is everything). The communication of anything, whether it is a historical perspective, a measurement of time, or a scientific principle, is dependent on a relation between the materiality of media and the immateriality of ideas. In order for abstract ideas to be communicated, they must be differentiated from other information that is also present. The noise must be excluded in order for the signal to get from sender to receiver, but Darboven subverts what is considered noise. The operations of writing, reading, and counting are basic techniques that are present in every instance of communication, and that exist at a level before the addition of content. History is written, time is counted, and symbols are read, these concepts are the noise Hanne Darboven wishes to exclude, so that she may revel in the silence of her processes, which are pure data.

Practicing silence is the imposition of irrationality on the rational and vice versa. It is the simultaneous existence of a positive and negative, the effort to suspend a work in time through the tautological refutation of all thought processes. Hanne Darboven uses elementary operations

14 ich würde sagen, nach der Unruhe inklusiver Krieg und Tot und Faschismus, ist Ruhe höchstes Anliegen, was du praktizieren kannst. My transcription and translation.
of communication to comment upon the failure of those very operations to successfully communicate. For, though Darboven attempts to go on into infinity, she also accepts the finitude of her project. Her process of going on is the acceptance of the material reality of the world, the terrifying isolation of the self, the unknowability of the universe, and the trap of linear time.
Figure 5. *Schreibzeit* Band III, p. 20. Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University.
Figure 6. *Schreibzeit* Band III, p. x (0). Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University.
Figure 7. Schreibzeit Band III, p. 1. Courtesy of Professor Brigid Doherty at Princeton University.
Works Cited


Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting”


