

Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983, 1980–83

[T]ime today is no longer a principle of intelligibility...let alone a principle of identity.... So it is with an image of excess—excess of time—that we can start defining the situation of supermodernity.

—Marc Augé

From the moment in the mid-sixties when she moved to New York City after a highly academic training at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, Hanne Darboven's work has been allied with conceptual art practices. Based by the late sixties on various forms of numerical and mathematical writing, her systematic work securely occupied in the realm of abstraction and universality: "I only use numbers," she explained, "because it is a way of writing without describing.... It has nothing to do with mathematics. Nothing! I choose numbers because they are so constant, confined and artistic. Numbers are probably the only real discovery of mankind. A number of something (two chairs, or whatever) is something else. It's not pure number and has other meanings."¹

Over time, time has become the focus of her art. For Darboven time is the primary and essential structure of human life, Annelie Pohlen argues, "[it is] a basically intangible measure for the totality of the indices determining being; it is the content of consciousness; it exists beyond human comprehension."² The calendar, which subsequently in large part formed the foundation stone of Darboven's art practice, again offered a universal orientation, embodying a given, prefabricated, ready-made temporal system. Calibrated in her work in many diverse ways over almost three decades, it has provided the basis of an arbitrary artistic system that has the appearance of objectivity. Conjoining a rigorous numerical process to free associative roots, and tight rational thought to intellectual freedom, this capricious sense of time has resulted in diverse monumental works, which may span a month, a year, even a century, all recorded day by day.

In the early seventies, Darboven introduced a kind of writing into her work that, although executed by hand, took the form of an even, cursive script, standardized and regulated, systematic and abstract. It, too, in resisting decoding, conformed to her basic tenet, epitomized in this quotation she borrowed from the Dutch politician Wiert Pauwel: "A working method is not a system of thought. We do not believe that even the most ingenious of systems could completely illuminate life in its totality."³ In 1973 she began incorporating texts—transcribed directly because, she has claimed, they could not be bettered—from various writers, initially Heinrich Heine and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose works spoke to her

recognition of the failure of the grand narratives of Enlightenment thought to provide convincing encompassing interpretations and, equally, to her fundamentally romantic existentialist position. Then, in 1978, when she first addressed specifically historical issues, she introduced visual documentation, primarily in the form of found and rephotographed images, alongside the numbers and looping texts. Shortly after, she invented a system of musical notation based on her system of numbering dates, and from which, since 1979, she has composed scores for organ, double bass, string quartet, and chamber orchestra. For Darboven her music is like her "mathematical writing," a highly abstract language functioning in an entirely self-referential manner; it thus serves as an abstract correlative to the concrete, visually based nature of her artwork.

Comprised of 1,590 sheets, each measuring fifty by seventy centimeters, and nineteen sculpture-objects, *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983 (Cultural History 1880–1983)*, 1980–83, is one of Darboven's grandest, most epic works to date. Weaving together cultural, social, and historical references with autobiographical documents, it synthesizes the private with the social, and personal history with collective memory. Braided among the vast numbers of postcards, caches of pinups of film and rock stars, documentary references to the first and second world wars, geometric diagrams for textile weaving, a heterogeneous sampling of New York doorways and portals, illustrated covers from major newsmagazines, plus the contents of an exhibition catalogue devoted to postwar European and American art, and a kitsch literary calendar, are extracts from certain of her earlier works, exhibition catalogues from solo shows, and other mementos of previous exhibitions. The result resembles an encyclopedia rather than an archive; it feels exhaustive, but, logically, cannot be. Like an encyclopedia, it catalogues and displays information without subordinating it to a dominant narrative form. Panels are sequenced and grouped, then the groups juxtaposed; physically contiguous, they are not usually cognitively connected. In contrast to many of Darboven's previous large-scale works, no overriding calendrical system structures this work. Such is the magnitude of its scale that it does not invite being read, however, so much as experienced visually. An *image* of information, it might best be unraveled by meandering through the site, wandering from panel to object, object to panel, part to part aided by neither a strict nor exclusive methodology. Installed in a tight-knit formation around the walls of a large space, it takes on a spectacular panoramic quality.

If the effect created by too few objects is accumulation and by too many fragmentation, then between these two extremes lies a point, precariously held in *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983*, where quantity instills its own visual structure. At a microlevel, Darboven's use of the grid provides a taut formal structure that appears endless, infinitely repeatable; larger sections cohere by color and morphology rather than by subject matter per se. Repetition within any one section, or rephrasing of a part later within the whole, creates a

subtle rhythmic pattern of sameness and difference, such that ultimately the work escapes the twin poles of intolerable monotony and loss of aesthetic identity.

Perhaps more than any other work in Darboven's extensive oeuvre, an oeuvre that contains works of rich philosophical and political import, *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983* incorporates both a sense of spectacle and a highly charged emotional registrar. Supermodernity, as Marc Augé defines it, "makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity. History and exoticism play the same role in it as the 'quotations' in a written text."⁴ *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983* produces a kind of libidinal exuberance, an effect nonetheless shot through with pathos. Whereas in most of her work Darboven records and so arrests the flow of time, here, divesting herself of a constraining temporal structure, she seems to surrender to its excess. Attempts to try to synthesize this vast array, to decode it or otherwise render it coherent, are futile. A patchwork of modes, its amorcellated epistemological structure even calls into question the artist's former Sartrean-derived position which held that in the final analysis the universal is the truth of the specific. Nonetheless, within this grand, apparently unbridled display, she inserts the possibility, albeit qualified, of individual demurral. "At the end of the twelfth chapter of the Günter Grass book *Das Treffen in Telgte (The Encounter in Telgte)* is a passage that reflects exactly what I think," Darboven once stated,⁵ "Heinrich Schütz, who had attended the debate as though absent, answered the question: For the sake of the written words, which poets alone had the power to write in accordance with the dictates of art. And also to wrest from helplessness—he knew it well—a faint 'and yet.'"⁶

Lynne Cooke

The series of black and white photographs, *Doors New York City*, in *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983* was made by Roy Colmer.

1. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, "Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers," *Artforum* 12, no. 2, (October 1973), pp. 35–36. (Translation modified.)
2. Annelie Pohlen, "Hanne Darboven's Time: The Content of Consciousness," *Artforum* 21, no. 8 (April 1983), p. 52.
3. Quoted in Kathryn Hixson, "Chicago in Review," *Arts* 64, no. 7 (March 1990), p. 123.
4. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London:

Verso, 1995), p. 110.

5. Amine Haase, trans. Michael Schultz, "An Interview with Hanne Darboven," reprinted in *Hanne Darboven: Primitive Time/Clock Time*, exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia: Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, 1990), p. 14.

6. Günter Grass, *The Meeting at Telgte*, trans. Ralph Manheim [New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990], p. 68–69.)