

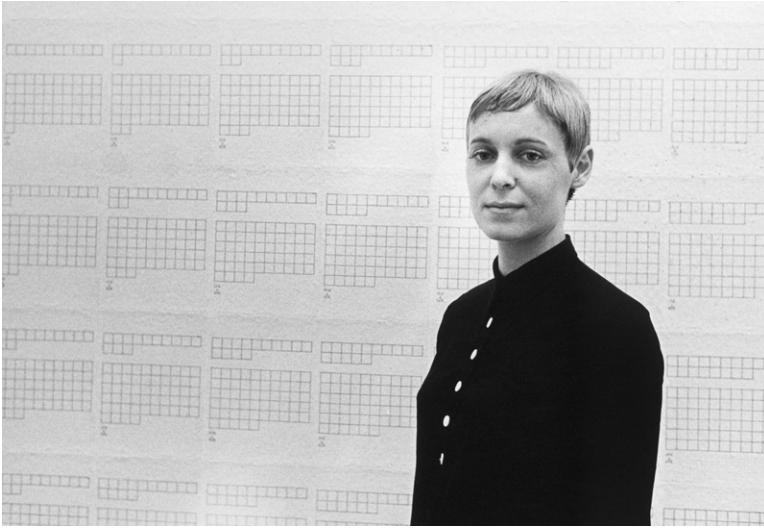
Hanne Darboven—  
Writing Time

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Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) was well-known in both her native Germany and more broadly among Conceptual art enthusiasts in Europe and the United States. In Darboven's art, line, drawing, text, and mathematical formulas overlap and slip into one another. These features are united by her minimal, idiosyncratic, and serialized approach to mark-making, which fueled her efforts to capture her subjective perception of time. Darboven described line as "a way of writing without describing." The exhibition at the Menil Drawing Institute explores three defining aspects of her work on paper: abstract drawings, date calculations, and monumental installations.

Darboven first gained recognition in the United States early in her art career when she lived in New York from 1966 to 1968. She exhibited alongside artists of the burgeoning Minimal and Conceptual art movements. Minimalism refers to art that features simple linear or geometric forms, while Conceptualism prioritizes the artist's idea over material presentation. Lucy Lippard, one of the earliest essayists to consider Darboven's work, wrote of her initial encounter, "I remember being extremely moved, but also bewildered." Lippard's lasting impression of Darboven was of an artist "deep in the infinities of choices presented by all those lines and numbers."

The show opens with some of the artist's earliest works, the *Constructions*. These abstract drawings are based on fixed number patterns mapped onto paper. In *Construction/Perforation New York, 1966/67*, an arbitrary number sequence is translated into diagonal lines that increase and decrease in length sequentially, starting at five graph squares long, then ten, then nine, and finally arriving back at five. Small pinholes indicate where each counting cycle begins and ends. Other variations include drawings in which she wrote out these sequences as text, while others dispense with line altogether and instead present just the paper with hole-punched patterns. Much of Darboven's art from this time can appear as though they are working drawings, as her notations, measurements, and musings are found throughout the composition. Although she provides the inner workings of her thought process, and the drawings seem to follow strict parameters, Darboven's calculations often do not align with



Portrait of Hanne Darboven at Konrad Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf, 1968. Image courtesy of bpk Bildagentur / Angelika Platen / Art Resource, N.Y. © bpk

mathematical reason. She was more interested in process as opposed to expression—a critical disruption of the preceding generation’s approach to abstract art. Following a conceptual logic known only to the artist, these works are elegant, immersive, and inscrutable puzzles.

In 1968 Darboven transformed her abstract drawings into works that ambiguously visualize the passing of time. The artist adapted her drawings into formulas that calculate specific dates as a single number, which she then converted into a series of counted marks. *Six Books on 1968*, 1969, is one of the earliest examples of this method. Within the sheets of each book (which were subsequently filmed as a page-by-page sequence), she represented every day of the year as a single number. She arrived at this sum, what she termed the “K-value,” by adding up all the figures in a given date, making the first day of 1968 equal to 16K ( $1 + 1 + 6 + 8$ ). In *Untitled*, ca. 1971–73, Darboven depicted a century in her calculations, with each set of wavelike lines separated by a semicolon. Each curved section of this script counts as one “K,” with the last day of the century equaling 61K ( $12 + 31 + 9 + 9$ ).

Beginning in the 1980s, as her works on paper grew in number and scale, Darboven made engulfing installations that consist of hundreds—even thousands—of sheets. *Inventions That Have Changed Our World*, 1996, contains grid formations, written calculations, transcribed text, found sculptures, and pasted images. This extraordinary work incorporates all the early hallmarks of her drawings alongside the evolutions of her practice.

The primary subject is represented by ten figurines of historic inventors and their most notable creations, from Johannes Gutenberg and his printing press to the Wright Brothers and their airplane. In bringing together these figures—few of whom even lived past the year 1900—to represent the 20th century, she stages a curious clash of time scales, questions technological progress, and stands in direct opposition to standard historical narratives. She undermines the linear tools of order (grids, rows, columns) and effectively levels the relative importance of the events and individuals. She further destabilizes chronology by ending nearly every sheet by writing out “today” in English and German (*Heute*), then crossing out the text with a single line. The repetition and accumulation of the word “today” relentlessly connect this history of invention to the present, exploring the implications of these events to the current moment. Crossing out the word “today” acknowledges that time cannot be captured through words or on paper. The present moment is always there and not there, instantly receding into the past as soon as it is written.

Darboven’s subjective accounting of time enlarges ideas of what drawing can be. Drawing, in its immediacy, already holds close associations with time and duration. Darboven’s multivalent approach to line—be it as language, notations, or editorial markings—expands and collapses time in ways that are perplexing and enigmatic, and yet not altogether unfamiliar to the human experience.



This exhibition is generously supported by Suzanne Deal Booth; Diane and Michael Cannon; Sheila Noeth and Ted Dohmen; John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Janie C. Lee; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

To read about Hanne Darboven's Houston connection, visit [menil.org/readonline](http://menil.org/readonline)

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### LECTURE

Kyle Chayka: *Minimalism, Between Art and Life*

Wednesday, December 6, 7 p.m.

Menil Drawing Institute

### CURATOR TALK

Kelly Montana on Hanne Darboven

Sunday, December 10, 3–3:30 p.m.

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### MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Resonant Beauty: *Mathematical Foundations in Music*

Thursday, January 11, 7 p.m.

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## EXHIBITION DATES

October 27, 2023–February 11, 2024

The Menil Drawing Institute  
The Menil Collection

FRONT Hanne Darboven, *Untitled* (detail), ca. 1971–73. Felt-tip pen on four sheets of ruled paper, 11 ¼ × 8 ¼ in. (29.7 × 21 cm) each. Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg, and Sprüth Magers. © Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2023. Photo: Timo Ohler