

The Menil Collection Presents *Hanne Darboven—Writing Time*

Exhibition spans the entirety of Darboven's career, exploring the role of line, text, and drawing in her practice



HOUSTON—*June 13, 2023*—This fall, the Menil Collection will present *Hanne Darboven—Writing Time*, **on view at the Menil Drawing Institute October 27, 2023–February 11, 2024**. Hanne Darboven (1941–2009), a German conceptual artist, is best known for her immersive installations of individually framed sheets filled with text formulations and collaged images. At the heart of her practice is the question of how to make visible the unfolding of history, the passing of time, and one's experience within both.

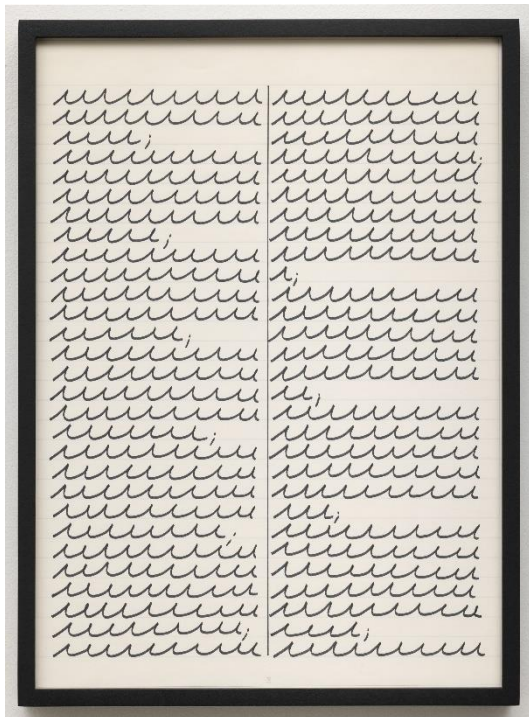
In 1973, Darboven penned a letter to her friend, the artist Sol LeWitt, that is both correspondence and a manifesto. In it, she declares her use of writing, numbers, and dates to be her “field,” “unit,” and “desire,” and “as quiet as pencil and paper.” The letter, however, bursts forth with wavy lines, numbers, dates, and elongated dashes that fill empty space and cross out words, an addition that suggests an inherent contradiction to the proclaimed “quiet” of the materials specific to writing and drawing. The note, and the wide variety and quantity of marks it contains, depicts the intertwining of writing and drawing that formed the core of Darboven's artistic practice for over forty years.

Rebecca Rabinow, Director of the Menil Collection, said, “The Menil Collection is proud to present a survey of the drawings of Hanne Darboven, whose work offers a unique way of thinking about drawing and what it means to put a line on paper. Her thought-provoking and

idiosyncratic serialized approach to mark making was fueled by her efforts to capture her own perception of time.”

Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute, said, “What initially drew me to Hanne Darboven’s work is how she enigmatically created an image of living through time. The act of drawing, in its immediacy, is already closely entangled with time and duration, but the physicality of her materials and multivalent approach to line also felt apt to reconsider under an expanded notion of drawing. These works are an elegant, immersive, and inscrutable puzzle, and I cannot help but be moved by the intensity of her vision when I look at them.”

The exhibition at the Menil explores three defining motifs of the artist’s work on paper—abstract drawings, date calculations, and monumental installations. The show opens with examples of the artist’s earliest works, the Constructions, abstract drawings based on fixed number patterns mapped onto graph paper. In *Construction/Perforation*, 1966/67, an arbitrary number sequence, is translated into a series of 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. The resulting horizontal bands of chevron-like patterns appear to bend toward and recede from the viewer.



In 1968, Darboven experimented with the transformation of her abstract drawings into works that ambiguously visualize history and the passing of time. The artist adapted her drawings into formulas that calculate specific dates and durations into a single number that she then converted into a series of counted marks. *Six Books on 1968*, 1969, is one of the earliest examples of Darboven’s method. Within the pages of each book, she represents every day of the year as a single number, what she termed the “K-value,” by adding up all the figures in a given date. This makes the first day of the year in 1968 equal to 16K (1 + 1 + 6 + 8). Another example is *Untitled (2K-61K)*, ca. 1970–73, in which Darboven depicts a century in her calculations, with each set of wavelike lines separated by a semicolon. For the artist, the line was “a way of writing without describing.”

In the last decades of Darboven’s life, as her works on paper grew in number and scale, she made engulfing installations that systematically brought together hundreds—even thousands—of sheets. The

Menil’s exhibition culminates with *Inventions that Have Changed Our World*, 1996, a set of more than 1,300 individually framed sheets. With grid formations, written calculations, transcribed text, found sculptures, and pasted images, this extraordinary work incorporates all of the early hallmarks of her drawings alongside the evolutions of her practice. The primary subject is ten figurines of historic inventors and their most notable creations—from Johannes Gutenberg with the printing press, to the Wright Brothers and their airplane. In bringing together the biographies of these figures—few of whom even lived past the year 1900—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—effectively leveling the relative importance of the historical events and individuals. She further destabilizes

chronology by ending nearly every sheet by writing out “today” in English and German, then crossing out the text with a single line. The repetition and accumulation of the word “today” insistently connects this history of invention to the present moment, while crossing it out acknowledges that time cannot be captured in this way. The present moment is always there and not there, instantly receding into the past as soon as it is written.

Hanne Darboven—Writing Time is curated by Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute. The show will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue that features essays by Kelly Montana, and Dieter Schwarz, independent curator, and former Director of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland.

About the Menil Collection

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection’s main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders’ belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

About the Menil Drawing Institute

The Menil Drawing Institute was established in 2008 in recognition of drawing’s centrality in the lives of artists and its crucial role in modern and contemporary artistic culture. The Drawing Institute has since developed an international profile for exhibitions, scholarship, and collaboration. In 2018, a dedicated building for the Menil Drawing Institute, designed by Johnston Marklee, was inaugurated. It is now the site of regular drawings exhibitions, an annual monumental wall drawing commission, public programs, and study. menil.org/drawing-institute

Funding

This exhibition is generously supported by Diane and Michael Cannon; the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

Image Captions

1. Portrait Hanne Darboven at Konrad Fischer Gallery, Dusseldorf, 1968. Image courtesy of bpk Bildagentur / Angelika Platen / Art Resource, NY. © bpk
2. Detail view of Hanne Darboven’s *Untitled (ohne Titel)*, ca. 1971–73. Felt-tip pen on 4 sheets of ruled paper, 11 11/16 x 8 5/16 in. (29.7 x 21 cm) each. Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg, and Sprüth Magers. © Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2023. Photo: Timo Ohler

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