

## Staging the Archive:

Ydessa Hendeles and Hanne Darboven

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## Abstract

This article is dedicated to art practices that, in a variety of ways, mobilize the model of the archive. These “archival artworks” probe the possibilities of what art is and can do. But also the other way around, they explore and challenge the principles on which archival organizations are built. Such an exploration of the archive through art is timely. The reason for the current relevance of an exploration of “archival thinking” is a generally cultural one. Whereas the role of narrative is declining, the role of archive, in a variety of forms, is increasing. What is argued is that the archive has become the dominant symbolic and cultural form. The work of two artists will be discussed as prime examples of such archival art practices: First the installation “Partners: the Teddy Bear Project”, by the Canadian artist Ydessa Hendeles; Next, the archival installations by the German artist Hanne Darboven.

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*Keywords:* archive, archival art practice, Hanne Darboven, Ydessa Hendeles, narrative, teddy bears, conceptual art

In recent years the archive has become a contested institution. This has resulted in a so-called “postmodern turn” in archival science. Many publications in this field write about the implications of postmodern thinking for the institution of the archive. The role of archival science in a postmodern world challenges archivists everywhere to rethink their discipline and practice. As Terry Cook formulates it:

A profession rooted in nineteenth century positivism, let alone in earlier diplomatics, may now be adhering to concepts, and thus resulting strategies and methodologies, that are no longer viable in a postmodern and computerized world.<sup>1</sup>

This paradigm shift takes distance from viewing archival records as static physical objects or passive products of human or administrative activity. It understands such records now as having radical consequences for the self-image of archivists. They are no longer the passive guardians of an inherited legacy. They are now seen as active agents who shape cultural and social memory. Whereas archivists were until recently information technologists embracing the notion of the archive as a neutral, even mechanical accumulation of information, now they have become cultural analysts conceiving the archive as storage of information as well as as a source of knowledge and power essential for social and personal identity.<sup>2</sup>

But what exactly does it mean that archives are no longer considered to be passive guardians of an inherited legacy but instead active agents that shape personal identity and social and cultural memory? This is the central question in this article. For the archive is far from a neutral guardian. Although the archive is in many cases a place where facts can be found, or, in the words of Jeffrey Wallen, “a place where secrets are revealed or where one can now find truths that had been hidden”, the archive is also a place that “actively shapes and produces the identities of those it registers.”<sup>3</sup> The archive is responsible for

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1 Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 2 (2001), 3.

2 See Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002).

3 Jeffrey Wallen, “Narrative Tensions: The Archive and the Eyewitness,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7. 2 (2009), 267.

significations that differ fundamentally from meaning produced by narratives.

Wallen describes how contacts with archiving mechanisms shape our identities.

Who we are is always also now produced by archival machines that register, observe, and record our passage through the apparatuses of society. [...] The driver's license, the school report card, the credit card receipt, the medical report are the artifacts we receive from our interactions with the gigantic bureaucracies of the state, the school, the financial system, and the medical-insurance complex. Our identities are woven for us, and the archive is the loom.<sup>4</sup>

A strong example of the shaping power of archival organization is Wallen's case study of the Stasi archives in former East Germany. Although it stems from a totalitarian society that is utterly bureaucratic in obsessive ways, the point is that the way the Stasi does the archiving, the way it performs as an active agent in creating the identities of those who they register, is not fundamentally different from what any archival organization does:

In almost all instances the Stasi manage to create something akin to the "biographical illusion" through the techniques of surveillance and its arsenal of policing measures. Thus, in many cases, the Stasi's tales of dissidence converged with the lived experiences of the critical writers the Stasi pursued. Many of the individuals the Stasi branched as hostile or dissident were forced, sooner or later, to act out their Stasi-engineered destinies [...] Invariably the two "stories" merged –that of the Stasi and the individual's own life story – and these individuals were forced to live out the fiction that state apparatus and the Stasi had fabricated for them.<sup>5</sup>

The moment that an individual finds out about the fictional record the Stasi has archived of her or him, s/he will begin to think critically and antagonistically about

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4 Jeffrey Wallen, "Narrative Tensions: The Archive and the Eyewitness," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7. 2 (2009), 267.

5 Alison Lewis, "Reading and Writing the Stasi File: On the Uses and Abuses of the File as (Auto)biography", 387, quoted by Jeffrey Wallen, *ibid*, 267.

the East-German state apparatus. By doing this they begin to behave according to the accusations the Stasi made against her or him. Ultimately, this results in an internalization of an archival portrait that others have constructed. This true portrayal was not found in the archive, but produced by the archive.

Although this example is extreme in the sense that it comes from an archival practice in a totalitarian society, it demonstrates well how the archive is not just a neutral guardian but also an active agent. Archival science reflects more and more on the shaping power of the archive. Of course, archival theoretical discourse should not be conflated with the dominant ideas that archivists and historians still believe in. Yet, this current discourse seems to be symptomatic for a shift that emphasizes process instead of product, function instead of structure, archiving instead of archives, recording context instead of record, actively mediated “archivalization” of social memory instead of natural residue or passive by-product of social memory.<sup>6</sup> As a result, archives are no longer passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, or confirmed. And by extension, in the words of Cook and Schwartz, memory is not something found and collected in the archives, but something that is made in the archive, and continually re-made.<sup>7</sup>

## Staging the Archive in Modern Art

Such a re-thinking of the archive within archival science has already been initiated some time ago in the domain of modern and contemporary art and it still continues there. Although the earliest examples of such archival artworks go back to the 1930s (Duchamp, *Green Box* 1934), it is since the 1960s that archival principles have increasingly been used by visual artists to inform, structure, and shape their works. Their aesthetic practices consist of archival enquiry or construction, and the works are built out of archival materials. This use of the archive for artworks does not, however, imply an unreflected

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6 Terry Cook, *ibid.*, 4. For the term “social memory” and “collective memory,” see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992).

7 Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 172.

instrumentalization of the archive as artistic medium. On the contrary, these art works interrogate the principles, claims, potentials and effects of the archive. They usually interrogate the self-evidentiary claims of the archive by reading it against the grain. The interrogation by these artists may take aim at the structural and functional principles underlying the use of the archival record; or it may result in the creation of another archival structure as a means of establishing an archaeological relationship to history, evidence, information, and data; a structure that gives rise to its own interpretative categories.

In what follows I will discuss two different artistic practices that “stage the archive”, each focusing on a different element of archival organization. First I will present the work of Canadian artist Ydessa Hendeles and how that work questions the archival organizing principle of categorization. Next, I will present the work of German artist Hanne Darboven and how it confronts us with the activity or practice underlying archival organizations, namely administration.

## An Archival Heterotopia

When archival practices in modern art demonstrate the “order of things” by means of categorization, it is usually through presenting the deviant order of a heterotopia that they do so. A prime example of such a heterotopian art work is Ydessa Hendeles’ archival installation *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project*.<sup>8</sup> The installation consists of thousands of snapshots, each of which include the image of a teddy bear, arranged according to over one hundred typologies. The installation is structured like a presentation of natural history or cultural objects in a classic, traditional natural history museum. The meticulously framed snapshots completely and densely cover the walls (see fig. 1). In the middle of the space there are several antique museum display cases. Along the wall mezzanines have been built to permit closer inspection of those photographs that hang on the upper halves of the walls (see fig. 2).

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8 Ydessa Hendeles, is one of the most important collectors of contemporary art and of the history of photography. She has her own museum in which she curates exhibitions out of her own collection: the Ydessa Hendeles foundation in Toronto. For an analysis of her practice of collecting and curating, see Reesa Greenberg, “Private Collectors, Museums and Display: A Post-Holocaust Perspective,” *Jong Holland* 1.16 (2000), 29-41.

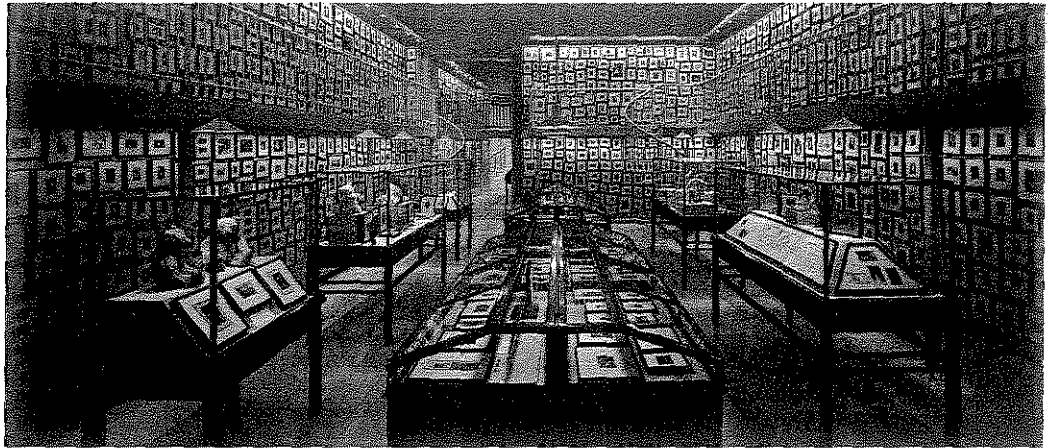


Fig. 1 Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project*, 2002  
© Ydessa Hendeles

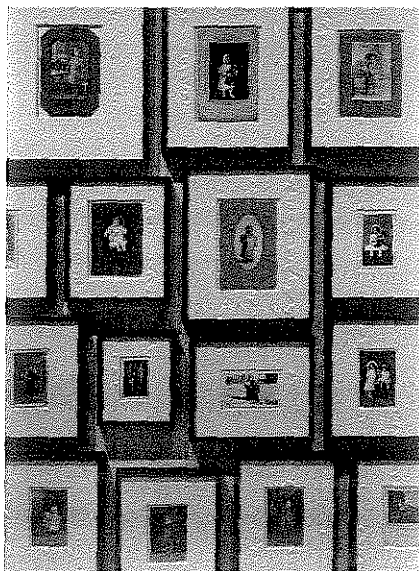


Fig. 2 Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project*, 2002  
© Ydessa Hendeles

When one enters the installation one wonders what all these images have in common. It takes some time before one becomes aware of the fact that there is a teddy bear in every photograph. The next discovery is, however, that the installation does not offer more of the same, just more pictures with teddy bears, but that the photographs have been classified according to specific categories. These categories are completely surprising: the installation, seemingly providing a history of the teddy bear, shows that the most different social and ethnic identities have used the teddy bear as a totem or fetish to identify with. The title of this installation, “Partners”, seems to refer to the intimate relationship between the owners of teddy bears and their playmate.

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Fig. 3 Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project*, 2002. © Ydessa Hendeles

When the installation was shown as part of a larger exhibition in Hitler's own former museum, the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Hendeles wrote the following about the appeal of the teddy bear in the catalogue:<sup>9</sup>

The teddy bear has appealed not only to children as playthings and as surrogate playmates, but also to adults as props to express whimsical fantasies at parties, in the workplace, at sports events, and in sexual play. In fact, teddy bears have attended every social function in society. They have been photographed at weddings, in schools, in hospitals, on battlefields, at births, deaths, and memorials.<sup>10</sup>

Her installation seems to provide evidence of this: when we start recognizing the different typologies, we suddenly see all the different groups (see fig. 3). Soldiers with teddy bears, students with teddy bears, prostitutes with teddy bears, lesbian couples with teddy bears: there is no end to the different identities that presented themselves with the teddy bear as their emblem and guardian. The thousands of teddy bear snapshots turn

9 The Exhibition, which Hendeles curated for the Haus der Kunst in Munich has the same title as her teddy bear installation: *Partners*. In case of the exhibition the title has several meanings. It refers to the collaboration between a public Museum and a private collector, between a German institution and a Jewish collector, between Hitler's former museum and the daughter of Holocaust survivors. For an analyses of this exhibition, see Ernst van Alphen, "Die Ausstellung als narratives Kunstwerk/Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art", *Partners*, edited by Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (Köln, 2003), 143-85

10 Ydessa Hendeles, "Notes on the Exhibition", *Partners*, edited by Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (Köln, 2003), 212.



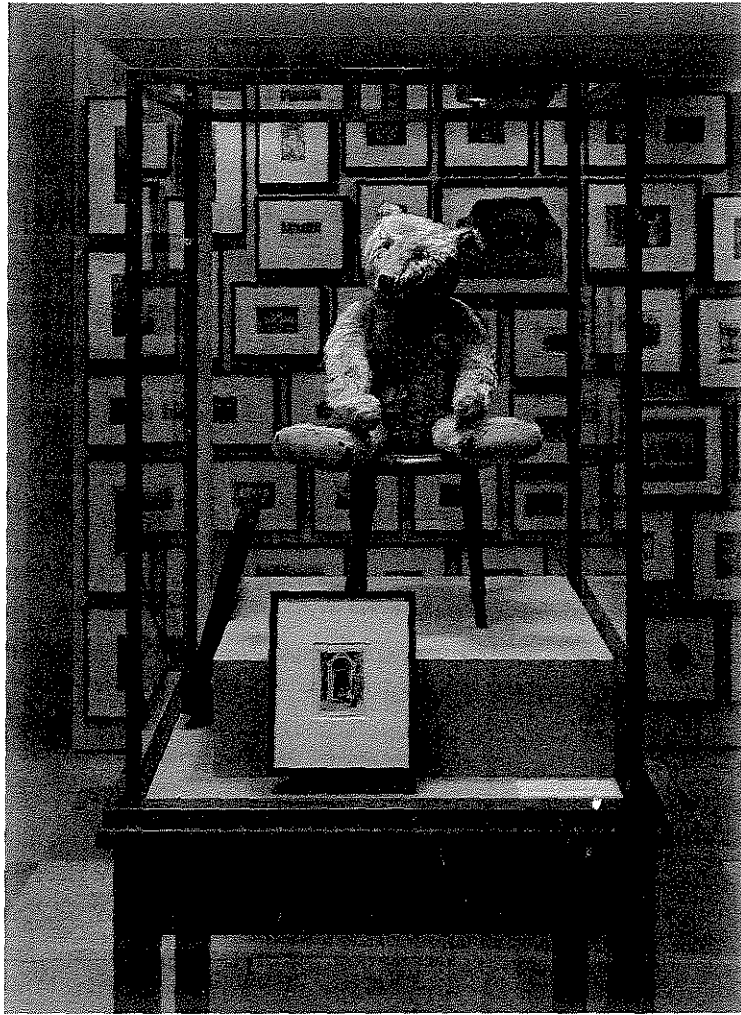


Fig. 4 Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners: The Teddy Bear Project*, 2002 © Ydessa Hendeles

out to be extremely diverse. Within this corpus an endless number of distinct categories can be distinguished. The pursuit of specificity, differentiation and categorization leads to amazing results in *Partners*.

At first sight Hendeles' "visual thesis on the history of the teddy bear" conveys an appearance of absolute trust in thorough, positivistic scholarship. But as she herself points out in her essay in the catalogue, this reassuring aura of scholarship is deceptive, "because the use of documentary materials actually manipulates reality. Creating a world in which everyone had a teddy bear is a fantasy, as well as a commentary on traditional thematic,

taxonomic curating". Hendeles further comments:

Because of the relative rarity of photographs that include teddy bears, the resulting multitude of over three thousand pictures provides a curatorial statement that is both true and misleading. Viewers are inclined to trust a curator's presentation of cultural artefacts. While these systems are not necessarily objective, they can be convincing and therefore of comfort.<sup>11</sup>

In this statement Hendeles uses the characteristics of the teddy bear as such in a very subtle way to describe the effects of the archive (see fig. 4). Earlier in her text she described the teddy bear in terms of a duality:

As a mohair-covered, stuffed, jointed toy, with movable arms, legs and head, a teddy bear can be cradled and hugged like a baby. But the wild bear referenced by the toy is an animal that can be threatening to human beings. Having a ferocious guardian at one's side makes the teddy into a symbol of protective aggression, which is why, for the past hundred years, it has provided solace to frightened children and later to adults, who carry that comfort with them as a cherished memory.<sup>12</sup>

The duality of the teddy bear also characterizes the archive: comforting and aggressive at the same time. Comforting because it has the reassuring aura of objectivity and systematicity; aggressive because it subjects reality and individuality to classifications that are more pertinent to the systematic and purifying mindset than to the classified objects. It imposes the ideal of pure order on a reality which is messier and more hybrid than the scholarly device of the archive can live with.

The grotesque proportions and effect of Hendeles installation turn it into a heterotopia that causes shattering laughter in the same way as Borges' short story about the Chinese Encyclopaedia did for Michel Foucault. But in Foucault's definition

11 Ibid, 211-212

12 Ydessa Hendeles, "Notes on the Exhibitions", *Partners*, edited by Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (Köln, 2003), 211.

heterotopias are sites in which categories collide and overlap. That is not the case in the archival installation of Hendeles; on the contrary. The categories imposed on the collection of snapshots with teddy bears fit neatly and they are completely understandable and in that respect convincing. The categories do not really overlap, nor do they collide. But ultimately, Hendeles' installation *Partners* shows the utter arbitrariness of archival typologies. Hendeles' work *Partners* is preposterous in relation to the archival genre, which it adopts. It presents a view of its structural formation that might not otherwise be visible. Her excessive differentiation within the corpus of snapshots showing teddy bears produces ultimately in the viewer a feeling of being lost. The rigorous systematicity of the archive suddenly shows its Janus head of total arbitrariness.

But what does arbitrariness mean here? The categories are arbitrary not because they do not fit the images which are collected within it. They are arbitrary because they define by categorizing the individual human beings in the snapshots in a way that seems to be utterly irrelevant to their own sense of identity. Hendeles' archival installation makes us realize how we, our identities, are caught within an external body of archives. These archives compulsorily fabricate an objective identity for us, which cannot be resisted because it is objectively true. In this sense, the snapshots substantiate the used categories most effectively indeed. But by means of a radical and excessive explosion of categories, the archival effect of individual identity construction implodes. Foucault defined heterotopias more by what they do than by what they are: "heterotopias desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its sources, they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences."<sup>13</sup> This is ultimately what also *Partners: the Teddy Bear Project* does and why it can be seen as an archival heterotopia. This heterotopia makes legible the ground on which knowledge and identity are built by complicating that ground through excessiveness.

Within the endless series of typologies in this installation, the category of Jews, hence, of possible victims of the Holocaust, and of survivors of the Holocaust, forms an important category. The feeling of melancholia hits you immediately when you enter the

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13 Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1994), xviii.

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room. This excessive and emblematic archive shows us lost worlds in the extreme. Of course, teddy bears do not belong to the past; children and other groups of people still have them and play with them. But because of the fact that these snapshots are old and that they are presented as part of an archive, they automatically belong to the past, to a lost world. Within the metaphorical realm of “lost worlds” the Holocaust figures as the most literal case. That is why within the typology the category of Holocaust victims with teddy bears is central.

But Hendeles activated the frame of the Holocaust in yet different ways. After the viewer had spent time in the Teddy Bear installation, she entered a space that, compared to the densely packed archival installation, was almost empty. One only noticed at the other end of the room a small boy on his knees. It turned out to be the sculpture titled *Him*, by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan from 2001. It is a puppet-like sculpture of Hitler with the body of a small, innocent boy and his adult, moustached face. Whereas the similarity between teddy bears and archives was already suggested, now the awareness of the association between teddy bears and Hitler (and archives) is unavoidably also a case of similarity.

Hitler, too, was aggressive as well as comforting. He offered a deceptive source of safety to the German people. I quote Hendeles herself again:

The system of the teddy bear archive raises the notion of other systems created with strict stipulations, and how they can, because they appear to make sense, persuasively manipulate reality. The purity of race to which Hitler aspired was the application of a system of rules. Like the teddy bear, Hitler shares a duality of origin, where danger is domesticated.<sup>14</sup>

The framing of the teddy bear archive by a simulacrum of the person of Hitler has especially disenchanting consequences for the archive as such. This framing raises the question if the archive – its system and its goal – is complicit in Hitler’s ideal of a purity

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14 Ydessa Hendeles, “Notes on the Exhibition”, *Partners*, edited by Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (Köln, 2003), 215.

of race. Is it Hitler's modelling of the concentration camps on archival principles that makes the archive suspect, or is it suspect no matter what, intrinsically? A provisional answer to this question seems to have been given by Hendeles herself when she showed the teddy bear installation for the first time.

It was then part of an exhibition in the Ydessa Hendeles Foundation, Hendeles' own gallery in Toronto. That exhibition was entitled "SameDIFFERENCE" and took place in 2002-3. After the teddy bear installation the viewer entered a relatively narrow corridor. At the left side of this corridor were more framed snapshots of teddy bears. At the end of the same wall one noticed a small text panel, giving the description of an artwork, the name of the artist, and the date. It turns out that the viewer had missed noticing an artwork. On the right side of the corridor, on a completely white wall was a wall text in light grey letters. The text was by the artist Douglas Gordon, and was dated 1989. It ran as follows:

## ROTTING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

After having read this text, the confined space of the corridor suddenly gave way to a much larger space where the figure of Mauricio Cattelan's *Him* was kneeling. The subtle sequentiality of artworks made each work function as a framing device for the one that came before and after it. "Rotten From the Inside Out" became a chilling comment on the teddy bear, on Hitler, as well as on the archive as such.

## An Aesthetic of Administrative Principles

An artist affiliated with conceptual art, and obsessed by the registration of time, is the German artist Hanne Darboven. Most of her installations consist of framed panels, which contain a great number of sheets of paper. These sheets are covered with numbers or words and they form serial arrangements. In later works the sheets can also contain photographic images. The numbers and words can be handwritten, typed or printed. What the numbers and words refer to is not always clear; they form cryptic formulations. Because of their endless repetition on all the sheets of paper their proliferation can be

overwhelming. Clearly, the sequences of sheets with numbers and words do not form a narrative. It is a serial repetition of the same principles, which allow only slight variations and permutations that strikes the eye when the viewer encounters a work of Hanne Darboven. Besides this kind of installations Darboven has also made a great number of artist books, usually documenting the material which is also presented in the form of an installation. These books make the same impression as the installations. They are not narrative either; the principle that governs their structure is serial repetition. In their structure and in the procedures that result in those structures these works look like archives, for they seem to be based on archival principles.

Darboven's working method is not simply obsessive, it is also utterly systematic. Although it is not always immediately clear what the underlying system is, her work overwhelms by its systematic nature. It is not only the serial repetition of her work that expresses her fascination for systems and systematicity, but also the historical personae to whom she dedicates her works. These personae are often system-makers of the past. A work from 1975 is dedicated to Johann Jacob Moser, inventor of the modern filing system. *Ansichten 85* is a tribute to Alexander von Humboldt, a prolific taxonomist. Between 1799 and 1804 Humboldt and A.J.A. Bonpland explored South America, leaving with a vast collection of fauna and mineral specimens. Humboldt established the interconnection of the Orinoco and Amazon river systems. He recorded meteorologic and magnetic phenomena. The classifications he and Bonpland designed fill thirty volumes.<sup>15</sup> What remains to be seen, however, is if Darboven's fascination with these system-makers is triggered by their systematic working method or by the systems of classifying structures in which their working method resulted.

For, if Darboven's projects pursued the design of complex ordering or classifying systems, it would be surprising that her "systems" are so very enigmatic and difficult to decipher at first sight. But in many catalogues of her work this is precisely what critics or curators of her work try to do: to decipher the riddle of her systems. They explain, for instance, that she records time on the basis of the Gregorian calendar arrangement.

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15 See Gary Indiana, "On the River of No Return," *The Village Voice* 31. 5, 4 February 1986.

The sequences of numbers are the result of following a set of rules. Those rules are too complex to describe or summarize. Although it might be true that Darboven used this kind of rules for making her sequences of numbers, this does not mean that her numbers refer cryptically to specific moments in time. In other words, it does not mean that Darboven proposes an alternative calendar system to order the components of time: days, weeks, months and years. As an alternative proposition, the ordering system seems little effective, because too complex to grasp. In the words of Briony Fer:

The more you try to figure it out, the more the spectator becomes aware of losing the tread. The sequences are not to be understood if that suggests following its rational logic, or only up to the point where it is necessary to see its deviant meanderings departing from the system we are all too familiar with. There is a deliberate opacity which calls upon a different mode of attention to the work, one which is slow and cumulative.<sup>16</sup>

Fer's description of the required attention to the work as cumulative refers to the fact that a work of Darboven never consists of simply one series. Each series necessarily implies another one. The numeral figures and the writing of Darboven's works become a web of interwoven and entangled sequences, where a number of different series tend to be overlaid. "There may be the number of the page, the number of the grid overlaid on the page, the date, different numerical systems threading through, some digits, some written in words, others not. Some series are written in ink, some overlaid in pencil, some cancelled, some not. Series run simultaneously and become entangled one with the other."<sup>17</sup>

This multiplicity of series contributes to the impossibility of understanding Darboven's work in terms of the communication of an underlying message or information. Her use of numbers, language and images does not intend to communicate. Ultimately, it does not give access to another world than its own. Her use of numbers is emblematic for how she also uses words or images. She has stressed that she only used numbers because "it

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16 Briony Fer, "Seriality and the Time of Solitude", *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, edited by Michael Corris (New York, 2004), 225.

17 Ibid.

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is a way of writing without describing". She adds that numbers for her have nothing to do with mathematics.<sup>18</sup> Her "writing without describing" implies that not only her numbers, but also her writing and images have no referential object; they do not aim to describe or refer to another world.

If description or reference is not the issue, another possibility is that her serial repetitions should be appreciated as visual patterns. This formalistic approach to Darboven's work is, for instance, adopted by Mario Kramer in his essay "Hanne Darboven's 'Mathematical Literature'". He reads the serial sequences of her artwork *One Century – dedicated to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1771-1982* as decorative and rhythmic (see fig. 5). Although Darboven's work certainly has rhythmic and decorative qualities, especially from a formalist aesthetic point of view, it is not so much "the loving care of a craftsman" that the viewer encounters when viewing her work, but, as some have noted,

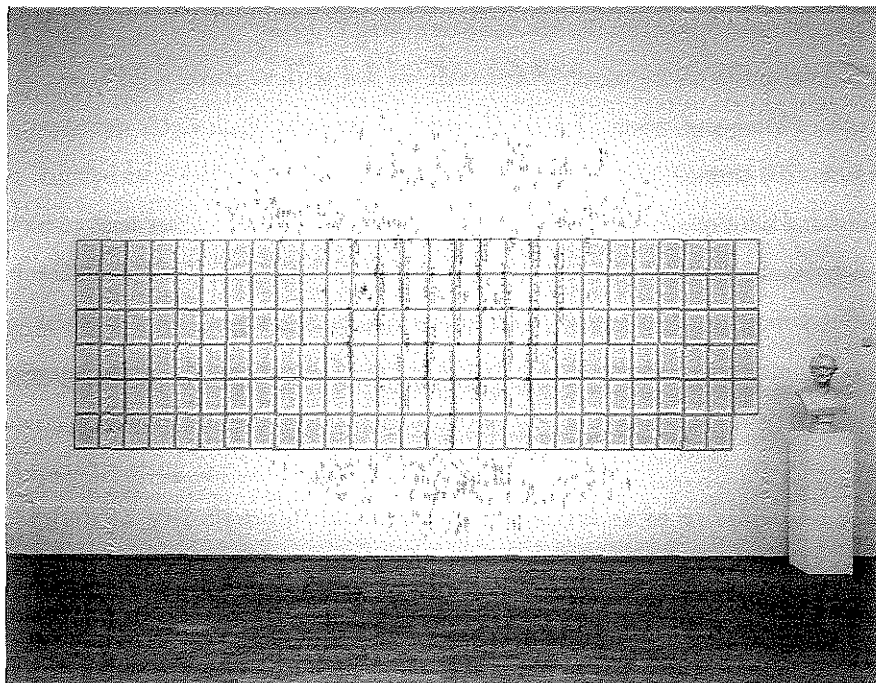


Fig. 5 Hanne Darboven, *One Century – dedicated to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1771-1982* © Hanne Darboven

18 Darboven, cited by Lippard, "Deep in Numbers", *Artforum* 12 (1973), 35.



“Prussian austerity and self-discipline”. Her work has been described as embodying “an aesthetic of bureaucratic principles”, or “an aesthetic of administration”, which seems to express the near-opposite of the loving care of a craftsman.<sup>19</sup>

The term “aesthetic of administration” has been introduced by Benjamin Buchloh as a characterization of conceptual art of the 1960s. Although Buchloh does not mention Darboven’s work, that work certainly fits his descriptions. According to Buchloh, conceptual art confronts the full range of the implications of Marcel Duchamp’s legacy. It reflects upon the role of author (or the author’s death) just as much as it redefined the conditions of reception. Whereas minimalism and Pop Art had already begun this kind of reflexion, working through the legacy of Duchamp, conceptual art draws different implications from it:

Just as the readymade had negated not only figurative representation, authenticity, and authorship while introducing repetition and the series (i.e. the law of institutional production) to replace the studio aesthetic of the handcrafted original, Conceptual Art came to displace even that image of the mass-produced object and its aestheticized forms in Pop Art, replacing an aesthetic of industrial production and consumption with an aesthetic of administrative and legal organization and institutional validation.<sup>20</sup>

Buchloh presents conceptual art as a radicalisation of minimalism’s critique of traditional artistic categories, by eroding them with modes of industrial, serial production. They went further in the critique of the discourse of the studio versus the discourse of production/consumption by establishing an aesthetic of administration.<sup>21</sup>

Minimalist artist Sol Lewitt has articulated this radicalisation of the conceptualists’ position in relation to the minimalists’ one quite precisely:

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19 Isabell Graw, “Work Ennobles – I am staying Bourgeois (Hanne Darboven)”, in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine*, edited by C. de Zegher (Cambridge MA, 1996), 252.

20 Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by A. Alberro and B. Stimson (Cambridge MA, 2000), 521.

21 Ibid., 525.

The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information [...] He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise.<sup>22</sup>

In this programmatic statement the role of the artist is displaced from producing beautiful or mysterious objects to giving information, to functioning as a clerk. It is precisely the ambiguity between “giving information” and “functioning as a clerk” that characterizes Hanne Darboven’s position in relation to the works she makes. But taking into consideration that in some of her works, like in *Card Index: Filing Cabinet* (1975), the intention to provide information has evaporated into empty gestures without giving whatever kind of information, the ambiguity seems to dissolve and the role of functioning as a clerk remains; an archival clerk (see fig. 6). The information or the patterns in which it results are less important than the process or attitude by which they are generated. An

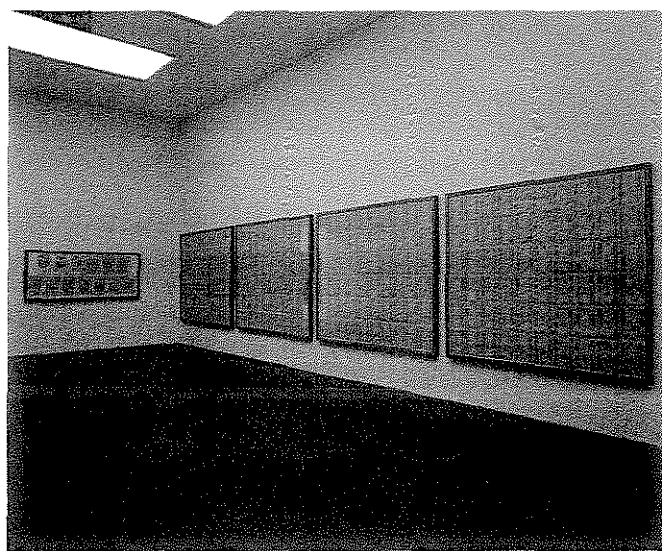


Fig. 6 Hanne Darboven, *Card Index: Filing Cabinet*, 1975 © Hanne Darboven

22 Sol LeWitt, ‘Serial Project #1, 1966’, 1967, n.p.; quoted by Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by A. Alberro and B. Stimson (Cambridge MA, 2000), 531.

alternative reading of her work, which is ultimately a kind of compromise, is that the information provided is the statement that artists are clerks performing institutionalized gestures and practices. The lack of any referential object is then the message or information; the ritualized performance of an administrative practice is a demonstration of that pseudo information.

In “Deep in Numbers” Lucy Lippard argues that upon encountering the work of Hanne Darboven, one is absorbed into the activity that underlies it. This absorption into the underlying activity is much stronger than the impulse to decipher the logic of the suggested system. This activity strikes the viewer as systematic, as repetitive, as utterly time-consuming, as subjecting the performer of the activity to a ritualized process, as a goal in itself, which is not necessarily intended to result in a product. Ultimately the activity makes the impression to be intransitive: although we see the sheets of paper with words, numbers and images in which the activity results, what the sheets seem to convey is the time that went into the activity, not the products that came out of it. This intransitivity of Darboven’s work is also expressed in one of her famous statements about her own work: “Ich schreibe, aber ich lese nicht”.<sup>23</sup> (I write, but I do not read). The writing and marking of which her artistic activity consists has no object, is not intended to communicate a meaning that can be read in the work.

Darboven’s working practice has been compared with that of medieval copyists in a scriptorium or with that of the industrial labourer “with his or her goal of fulfilling an hourly quota or shift of labour and nothing more”.<sup>24</sup> Both comparisons highlight Darboven’s chosen obedience to a system that has no objective other than to fulfil the task set out before her. The notion of labour implied by this obedience is one that asks no questions about its usefulness; the issue is rather a ritualized habit.

## Cultural History

One of Darboven’s most ambitious and elaborate works is probably *Kulturgeschichte*

<sup>23</sup> Darboven, quoted in Klaus Honnef, “Grundsätzliches”, in *Hanne Darboven: Bismarckzeit* (Köln, 1979), n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880-1983* (London, 2009), 82.

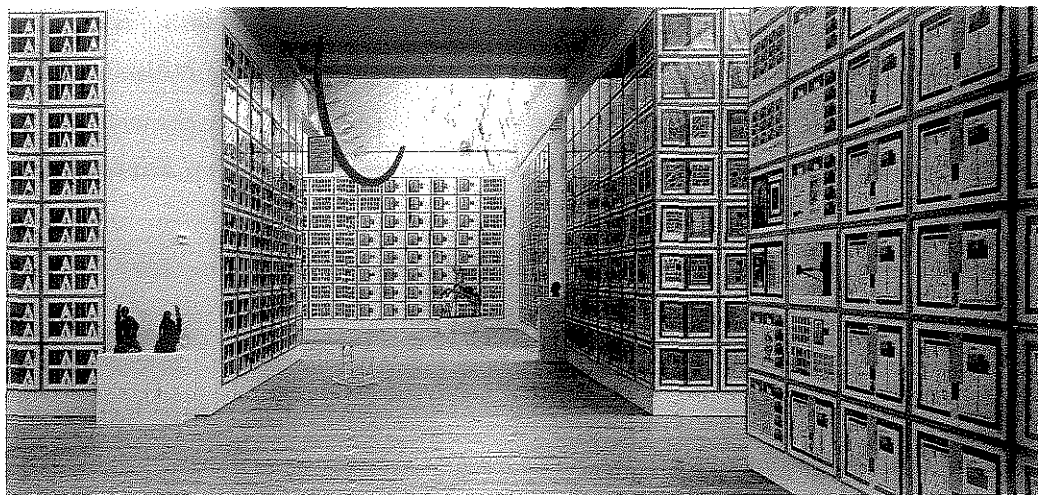


Fig.7 Hanne Darboven, *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983*, 1980-1983 © Hanne Darboven

*1880-1983 (Cultural History 1880-1983)*. At first sight, this installation is not really intransitive or non-referential because of the many picture postcards, pinups of movie stars, photos of artists, news magazine covers it includes. Each image seems to have its own referent. That is also the case for the nineteen sculptures that are positioned within the installation (see fig. 7). I use the original German title, *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983*, because the German connotes more intensely than the English “Cultural History”, the seriousness and heaviness of the nineteenth century historiographic paradigm that is evoked by this installation. Listing all the elements of this installation will never convey the impact of it, and perhaps this is also the point this installation wants to make. For, what is being presented within the installation is also structured as a list; many lists, one after another, and woven together. Listing all those lists will turn to be a rather powerless attempt to describe the installation. So, in order to convey this impact of futility and powerlessness, I will describe the installation.

In *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* Darboven models her work on historical, archival methods as a compilation of words, numbers, objects and images that have been taken out of their original contexts and presented as a spatial configuration. Its title suggests that this configuration is going to yield the potential of historical insight, insight in the cultural history of, probably, Germany. A general overview of the contents included seems to confirm this suggestion. Several hundreds of identical wooden frames are hung in rows

and cover the gallery walls. The total installation comprises 1590 works on paper and 19 sculptural objects. Not just one, but several gallery spaces are filled with these framed compilations of words, numbers and images. The images shown in these compilations are grouped around certain themes of subject matter. There are groups with pre-World War 2 postcards showing tourist sites, landscapes or city views; illustrated covers from German news magazines such as *Der Spiegel* and *Der Stern*; sheets of musical scores; photographs of doorways; geometric diagrams for textile weaving; contents of an exhibition catalogue of post-War European and American art; greeting cards; German cigarette cards from the World War 1 period; pages featuring numerical calculations and a form of repetitive cursive writing; imagery from Darboven's earlier work. The sculptural objects, nineteen in total include a teddy bear, a ceramic bust of a moustached man, a couple of shop-window mannequins wearing jogging attire, a book placed on a pedestal, a robot. The presented objects and material is clearly historical, they shown signs of age and wear. Many of the pictorial images have handwritten notations, like the notations on archival material of an archivist. Importantly, the work also includes a framed panel known as the "Index". This index functions as the catalogue of an archive. It raises the expectation that this index will help the viewer to understand the structure of the whole work, so that wandering around in it will become a more meaningful and satisfying experience. But its explanatory power is limited: it lists many of the contents we have already seen, but without providing deeper insight in its overall structure.

Explanatory power is not provided either by a specific group of panels which could be read as a metaphorical key to the work as a whole, a so-called *mise-en-abyme*, or mirror text. All apparent themes seem to be equally important or unimportant; there is no hierarchy suggesting that from the perspective of one specific theme the others will fall into their right structural place. The groupings of panels are structured serially, just one after another. Another interpretative possibility which can help us not to drown in this installation is to look for an identity shared by the great variety of themes and events presented in the installation. The German title *Kulturgeschichte*, for instance, could be read as a suggestion that the coherence of the presented materials can be found in the synthesising concept of German national identity. In that case, all the themes and events express in one way or another Germanness. But this option, too, is ultimately frustrated;

for, to mention just one example, how geometric diagrams for textile weaving can be read as expressions of Germanness is far from clear.

The dates of this *Kulturgeschichte: 1880-1983*, seem to be arbitrary, because they do not stand for significant dates in German or World history. But the History includes contents which cover the entire period: the fin de siècle period, World War I and II, the post-War reconstruction period, and it ends on the year the work itself was finished, 1983. From the perspective of the covered historical periods and events the dates are adequate: it is exactly this period of time which is documented in this compilation of historical materials. The cultural history of these 103 years is being portrayed, however, without providing any interpretative synthesis of this collection of historical material. The arbitrariness of the time frame suggests that a Rankean notion of historiography, a progressive account of monumental events like revolutions, wars and natural or economic disasters, is kept at bay. But it is not only a progressive account that is kept at bay; also a linear conception of history seems to be irrelevant. The presented historical materials are much too fragmented in order to reconstruct a linear history on the basis of that. The notion of history enabled by this archival enterprise is far more diffuse.

One aspect of *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* demonstrates in a subtle but most fundamental way the procedures of the archival clerk. Darboven has equalised the collected materials consistently and rigorously. Whatever the origin of the material, original or reproduced, handmade or readymade, everything is mounted on paper showing paper borders in red, black or white and is framed in standardised wooden frames of the same size (except, of course, the sculptural objects) (see fig. 8). Everything that entered this collection is subjected to the same ritualized process of framing; a process that creates order and suggests systematicity but refrains from signification. It is this refraining from signification that is ultimately the most puzzling aspect of this and Darboven's other works. One could argue that it is precisely this consistent refusal to create a *meaningful* order that makes this installation into an ideal archive - a model archive. For, according to standard notions, the archive is a repository of documents and objects that are rigorously and objectively preserved, categorized and processed, and made

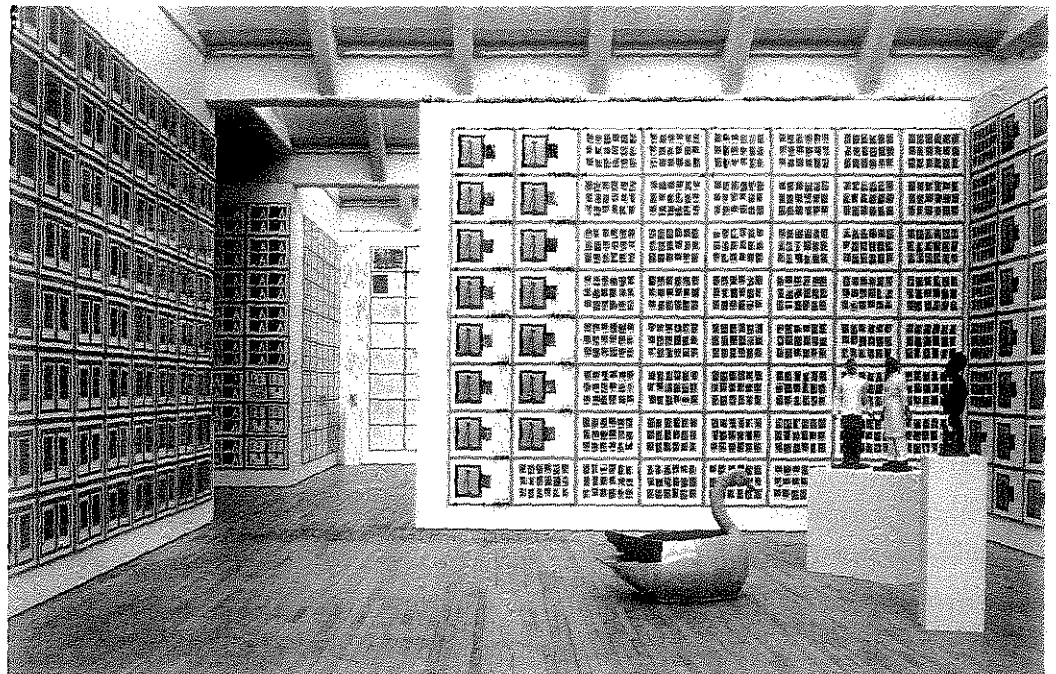


Fig. 8 Hanne Darboven, *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983, 1980-1983* © Hanne Darboven

accessible to and serviceable by a public.<sup>25</sup> In order to preserve “objectively”, signification of the collected material should be avoided, because signification imposes meaning on the materials, meaning which is not necessarily part of, or embodied in, those materials. Signification puts the objectivity of the archive at risk.

Categorization automatically implies signification. The categorizations of the archive impose meaningful orderings on the collected documents and objects. It is thanks to those categories that collected materials begin to make sense and that users of the archive can find their way in it or through it. However, the strived-for objectivity of the archive and the necessity to order and categorize are in conflict with each other. The highly valued ideal of objectivity is enacted by the procedures of the archival clerk whereas at the same time it is all the time precluded by the more concrete and specific procedures of ordering and categorization. The fact that the categorizing system of *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* seems to fail as a display of systemized knowledge that makes sense — of the distinguished categories — suggests that the classification is arbitrary and not really important. What is

25 Dan Adler, Hanne Darboven: *Cultural History 1880-1983* (London, 2009), 40.

important is the activity of documenting and archiving as such, as an end in itself.

## The Space of the Archive is the Time of the Archive

Darboven's non-referential procedure paradoxically results in a deluge of numbers, words or digits. It ends up in big, sometimes enormous installations of mainly framed sheets of paper, installed as series of panels. These installations occupy a lot of space, like conventional, modern archives tend to do. The question is, however, if this spatial, serial organization of her work into overwhelming space-occupying installations is a statement about archival space. Such an impression would be superficial, however, because too much based on its literal spatial dimensions and not enough on working through its effect on the viewer. As Briony Fer has argued, Darboven's systematic and serial organisations don't work on the basis of their spatial dimensions; her systems have the effect of squeezing out space and so make temporality do the work".<sup>26</sup> In her work we see the spatial topography of the grid emptied out of spatial content, to refocus attention on an endless cadence of loops of writing, legible or not, of crossings out, which simply resists a series.<sup>27</sup> It is a temporal procedure of copying words, numbers or digits, of writing out numbers in words, in which the viewer is immersed.

Seen as foregrounding, and being modelled on archival principles, it is not so much archival space which is being reflected upon in Darboven's work, e.g. as systematized, serial space, but its temporal object: the recording of time. It is time put to work in the work, which is experienced within the spatial coordinates of the work. The systematic practice of writing, counting, copying words or numbers, is, however, not fulfilling its promise a record of time. Encountering her works the viewer does not get a well-defined sense of a specific past, or of the past as such, nor of the present or the future. Paradoxically, the notion of time that is being evoked is as concrete as the dimension of space can be. Time is literally and materially embodied in these works.

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26 Briony Fer, "Hanne Darboven: Seriality and the Time of Solitude", *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, edited by Michael Corris (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 230.

27 Ibid.



But the seriality and systematicity of the performed procedure also shows its Janus head. Although it demonstrates the pursuit of a complete and total record of time, the endlessness of the procedure also points at its failure. The endlessly repeated procedure also draws one to the point that escapes the procedure and its resulting system. It draws one to a point that cannot be materialized in traces of a material procedure.

This has disenchanting repercussions for the archival procedures performed by Darboven, as well as for the archival institution as such. Seen as an institution that pursues the representation of time and history, Darboven's work presents the archive as a place of obsessive, endless administrative procedures which necessarily fail in what they pursue. Although the dimension of time is intensely embodied in spatial and material coordinates, this embodiment is at the same time highly abstract. The time embodied is not the time of history, but the time it takes to perform archival activities. As representations of time and history Darboven's archival installations seem to fail radically. The documenting and marking of time of which her installations and books consist are always, by definition, unfinished. This activity is performed as procedures which will be repeated endlessly and in that sense continue to fail to capture what they pursue.

## Conclusion

In order to convey the nature of the failure demonstrated by Darboven's work, Briony Fer evokes the figure of Dürer's *Melancholia* in order to argue that there is also a sense of interminable loss that haunts Darboven's project. In Dürer's etching the figure of Melancholia sits monumentally looming before a grid of numbers carved in stone. Through the lens of this Melancholia figure Darboven's project "comes to seem more like the interminable weaving of a death shroud, warding off death, but also nurturing it through repetition".<sup>28</sup> However, it is not a lost decade or century which is nostalgically being mourned. For, as argued, it is not the representation of history which is at stake in the counting, copying and writing of her work. These activities perform the time of mourning and loss as a temporal dimension which can never be resolved by or in the

28 Briony Fer, "Hanne Darboven: Seriality and the Time of Solitude", *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, edited by Michael Corris (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 233.

spatial coordinates of the archive. If the archive is not able to represent time and history, then it will continue to function in Darboven's works as a melancholic institution which can only and simply mark time. Nothing else.

Darboven's practice of archival administration seems to displace interest in the retrieval of historical experience to interest in the process and activity of administration as such. Darboven's endlessly repeated procedures of administration draws one to the point that escapes the procedure and its resulting system. Her practice confronts us ultimately with the impotence of obsessive administration. Her administrative acts fail at the end because they become more and more intransitive and the loss of their intended objects, historical data, is the result.

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