



BY JAN KUNKEL

ART TEXTS BERLIN

LOVE LETTER

Suppose to Conduct Feelings In a Circuit

Dedicated to the exhibition OPUS 25 A "LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN" by Hanne Darboven, on display at Heidi Gallery, Berlin. An envelope of materialist thought.

Dec 22, 2023

The Ersatz Nature of Keeping Time

Hanne Darboven's (1941-2009) show OPUS 25 A "LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN" opened on November 10, 2023, curated by Bill Kouligas and Benjamin Lallier. Although her encyclopedic oeuvre is known for a certain degree of impenetrability, audiences may be surprised to voyage to the reduced—and never reductionist—core of Darboven's practice: scoring, notation, recursivity.

Heidi Gallery exhibits a selected fraction of Darboven's printed scores and collages from the late 1980s and early 90s, including a room-spanning fifty-six-minute audio. We can focus on the recursive transfers in perception rather than giving in to an exhaustive browsing of mere formalities and information deadlock. The excess is located somewhere else. We will get to it.

Meanwhile, Beethoven's unsent love letter "Immortal Beloved" (1812) reminds me of the strikethrough nature of a draft text, en passant tributing Darboven's hinge on handwritten cross-outs ("heute," crossed out). And honestly, I feel compelled to write about Romanticism (ca. 1800-1850 in the Western world), in the confines of idealization, a time the sonata *Opus 25 A* cannot escape to signify because we haven't yet outlived its devastating socio-political repercussions. A love letter to Hanne Darboven, then, devoted to the cause of "writing time" that exceeds the naturalizing scope of the 19th century, renarrating the 20th century and beyond.

In what follows, rather than speaking to a somewhat intimate "you" of cathexis, I will refuse the recurrent German public fragility in which Darboven's art-making lodges, just by the fact that it is shown in state institutions such as the prestigious Bundeskunsthalle and by way of referencing canonical historical figures. I want to concentrate on her complexity, as in my contribution to continue "writing" her history of "Germany" in an increasingly hostile discourse. There are dire straits, propelling us to arrive at the opposite of Idealism, abolishing the transcendental subject.

Approximating my intent, it seems that the base of "to love" complicates the environing superstructure *Liebe* (crossed out), disattuning from purifications of the "Self" and the implicit retreat into antisocial enjoyment. How does this affirmative turn of events, beginning with the postulation of love in the negative, implicate Darboven's avant-garde body of work? How can we think of *Liebe* (uncrossed) while refuting the deadly zone of self-reassurance?

Eternally Engrossed in The Ego

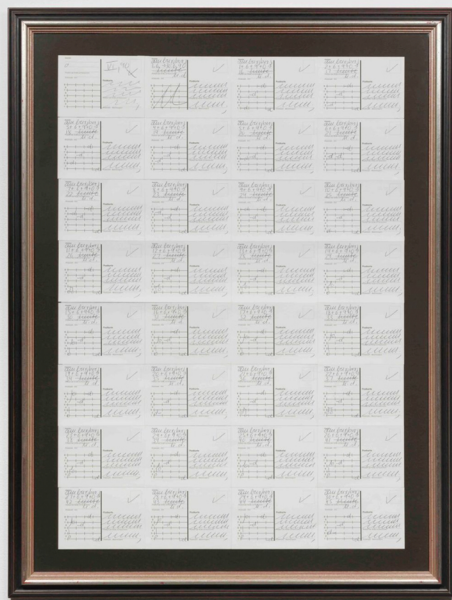
*Mein Engel, mein alles, mein Ich.*¹

To start this love letter with negation or—formulated in Darboven's outlet of practice—strikethroughs, shifts my attention to the German word "Liebe," what it beholds and elicits, announcing the barred, at times unbearable lived reality of emotional investment. Simpler said, I *cannot* write to you if I *cannot* let go of you *without* condemning you. Thus broken down into fewer linguistic units, the projective container of *Liebe* (crossed out) reads like a threefold segment of negativity: cannot-cannot-without, or, equalized into standpoints, anti-anti-anti. And devoid of a referent, we notice a certain nervousness in the chronopolitical field of "writing time."²

Many systems of writing time into the flesh, turning ideas into a material conveniently placed out of history, have been hidden from view through intentional, designed seamlessness. They connect to an afterwardness that the witness interprets too late. The flaw of historicizing the antidote of making time and keeping time that I—relating to Darboven—need to sustain *avant la lettre*, enunciates in the finite circumstance of the artist's death on March 09, 2009. Finitude, rupture, or immanence indeed drags us into periodical thinking between being and time where, learning from Rizvana Bradley, any "[b]efore also names an interminable recursivity."³ Translated to affirming dialectics, per Nadia Bou Ali, we can ask: "Are life and death



Hanne Darboven: Ohne Titel / Untitled, Monate mit Postkarten (Juni) / Months with postcards (June), 1990. Installation view, 2023, Heidi. © Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg.



Hanne Darboven: Ohne Titel / Untitled, Monate mit Postkarten (Juni) / Months with postcards (June), 1990. Installation view, 2023, Heidi. © Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg.

[b]efore also names a terminable recursivity."³ Translated to affirming dialectics, per Nadia Bou Ali, we can ask: "Are life and death resolved by a disjunctive synthesis? Are their concepts always destined for crisis?"⁴

In realms of collusion and complicity, Darboven encircles the potential regressiveness of representation. What appears oppressive in the representable, its alleged pureness, derives from source code that is historically conditioned and recursively built into its reifying derivatives of *Raison*. By "recursive," I mean Darboven's reliance on Friedrich Kittler's media-philosophical *Aufschreibesysteme* that allow a given culture to address, store and process relevant data in networks of techniques and institutions.⁵ Posed in her context, it responds to the inhuman scale of computational mechanics and its extra-human implication on memory formation.

Not by chance does Darboven highlight the unrepresentable, stressing the idiosyncratic time of an object, exemplified in her installation *Bismarckzeit* (1978), via the vast display of systematized and interlocked notations. The built-in code of the nation-state, demanding retroactive personification in figures like imperial chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), attaches to fatalist reason in the form of accumulated documents, leaving us to contempt the so-called *Staatsraison* as the origin myth of demarcated and romanticized nationhood. Darboven chimes in, perhaps involuntarily subsuming late 1970s capitalist realism, a public-private partnership of synthetic dialectical essence, encapsulated in a paradoxical structure of self-assertion: "My secret is that I have no secret."⁶ Beyond the missing reductionism of the sentence, anxiety shrinks, too, because nothing metaphysical is gained from it. We know who exploits who.

Suppose at this point my attempt of divesting the antithesis to love, commonly attested to a finalizing sentence such as "take care darling (citizen)," the short form of a moralistic endeavor meant to silence the —eternally—antagonized alien within. It cuts love from solidarity. And in turn, separability makes love empty of lovingly sustained differences between strangers. Instead of muting you, Hanne Darboven, I will try to update you on how I am affected by your work in an époque of *unfeeling* (which is fundamentally different from the insurgent potential of *not feeling* the hegemonic formatting of society along the liberal script of whiteness). Now consider the work needed most is de-supposing love of the Ego.

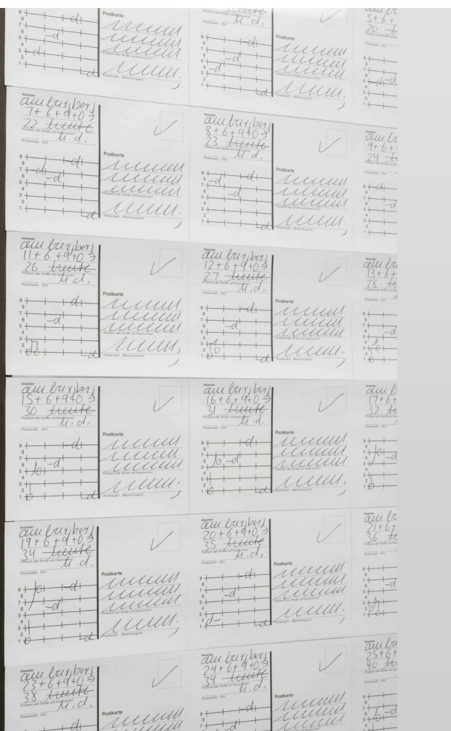
In Lacanian terms, however, I must ask a preliminary question to elucidate this *Liebesbrief* in juxtaposition to my previous non-familiarity with Darboven's artistic approach, aligned again to the recursive "before" of delusional untapedness: am I qualified to do so? Rebooted this way, I may amplify degrees of professionalism or the industrialization of the genre, though, on the opposite, I confidently mobilize "qualification," the vestibule through which all representable form must pass, for other ends, namely by bending the fiction of a "subject supposed to know" in favor of strikethrough or substitution of insufferable fixations: *Liebe* (crossed out), nothing else?

The Source Code of Romanticized Nationhood

Let me tilt it back to what I witnessed: the inscription of a less transcendent, that is, material encounter. Entering Darboven's show at Heidi Gallery, on Kurfürstenstraße 145, I face recursivity par excellence, unleashed between the horror of repetition and promises for heterogeneity. Summoned by "Mathematical Music," the systematic periodization of time surfaces as I listen to the audio *OPUS 25 A für Orgel "LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN"* (1988), interpreted by Elisabeth Sohst. The piece scores the 12 first days of a month, say January 1, February 1, etc., in intervals ranging between approximately four and a half to five minutes.

As much as linear time contradicts circularity, it simultaneously reinforces it, precisely a linear thinking that becomes circular time—Western thinking as the madness of civilization, a recorded time made countable and calculable—which is why inventing an alternating score is everything but not repugnant. In the absence of much further visualization in the gallery space, the absent object or referent transfers a coercive consent to auratic realms, diverted only by self-printed postcards, named *Untitled Months with postcards (June), 1990*.

These scribbles, fabricated by a mechanical corpus/device turning Darboven's body into a calculus, in service of an apparatus, are accompanied by the red framed collage *Opus 25 A "Ludwig Beethoven"* (1987)—resembling Spiegel magazine aesthetics and child books made of colored paper. Ergo, can we speak of her art-marking as an automated subjectless operation? To say the least, suspicion and yet not paranoia is paramount given the risk of succumbing to the charms of the alluringly beautiful, that is, Romantic music, emphasizing the intertwinement of continuity and security, plus the no less



Hanne Darboven: Ohne Titel / Untitled, Monate mit Postkarten (Juni) / Months with postcards (June), 1990. detail view, 2023, Heidi. © Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg.



Hanne Darboven: Opus 25 A "Ludwig van Beethoven", 1987. Detail view, 2023, Heidi. © Hanne Darboven Foundation, Hamburg. Courtesy Sprüth Magers. Photo by Marjorie Brunet Plaza.

distracting purgatories of mechanized anatomy. Crucial here: Darboven consciously resigns from using her serial scores to execute calculations in a primordial technical sense.

Similar to love, transgression is prone in how she leans toward a rational system, striving to make it irrational by manually transgressing her body, as an obsessional dimension of arithmetics, subjecting herself to sleep deprivation, illness and, again, the madness of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. To extrapolate, facing the sublime marks the gendered, racialized and classed boundary of being in the world because individual, collective and institutional time always already tether to a self-possessing subject position, affording to *write calculate / calculate write*⁷ the recursive circuits of (remembrance) culture. Such enforced consistencies, propagated by a bloated "Self," always already ignite a genocidal death zone, anchored to what is generalized in language as "natural" or "human" and what creates "identification" with these larger concepts.

By contrast, inventing another calendar (time) compels me to activate a historical tracer, precisely the Republican calendar introduced during the French Revolution and shortly upheld in the wake of the Paris Commune (1871), substituting the Gregorian calendar of the *Ancien Régime* and inaugurating a new Social, a differing order of decimal time, combined with references to agriculture and the rural economy, ousting the celebration of purist saints. Beyond the anecdotal and browsing pictures of androgynous Hanne Darboven, dressed in suits from her Nazi father, I agitate that the potential of *Liebe* (uncrossed and non-coherent) lies in a source code alternating from liberal common sense, detached from bias and *Raison*, attuned to analysis and *Zärtlichkeit*. We speak of a mind-dazzling before that drags recursivity back to where its artificial spring is suspected, away from its infinite reproduction of coloniality that cannot escape its very own circuitry of death-making.

To close, dear Hanne, I can ask our "Selves" with a sliver of polemics: does time regress like a Thermidorian⁸ or do we act like Jacobins in the face of recursive futurities?

Hanne Darboven: Opus 25 A "Ludwig Van Beethoven" at **HEIDI GALLERY**. Nov 11 - Dec 23.

¹ Ludwig von Beethoven (1812) - The transcription of his unsent love letter "Immortal Beloved" is available online (German only): https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unsterbliche_Geliebte [last retrieved: 13/12/2023].

² David Bussel (2023). Press Release: Hanne Darboven. *OPUS 25 A "LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN"*. Berlin: Heidi Gallery, accessible online: <https://www.heidigallery.com/p/hanne-darboven-opus-25-a-ludwig-van-beethoven> [last retrieved: 13/12/2023].

³ Rizvana Bradley (2021). On Black Aesthetics, in: *Diacritics: A review of Contemporary Criticism*, Vol. 49, Nr. 4, accessible online: <https://mlise.jhu.edu/article/876910/pdf> [last retrieved: 13/12/2023].

⁴ Nadia Bou Ali (2023). Ugly Enjoyment. Affirming life, inconsolably, in: *Parapraxis*, accessible online: <https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/ugly-enjoyment> [last retrieved: 13/12/2023].

⁵ Cf. Friedrich Kittler (1995). *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*, München: Fink, S. 519. I refer to Kittler's epilogue where he proposes the following definition: *Das Wort Aufschreibesystem [...] kann auch das Netzwerk von Techniken und Institutionen bezeichnen, die einer gegebenen Kultur die Adressierung, Speicherung und Verarbeitung relevanter Daten erlauben.*

⁶ "Mein Geheimnis ist, dass ich kein Geheimnis habe." - Hanne Darboven, 1991.

⁷ Cf. Kelly Montana (2023). Hanne Darboven. *Writing time*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ Thermidorians were a reactionary political movement during the French revolution.