

# “One + One is one two. Two is one two” (De-)Construction of Facts and Documentarism in Hanne Darboven’s *Schreibzeit* (1975-1999)

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## 1. Spatialization of Time

Numbers are one of the most elementary construction kits of our world. Among many other things, we also measure time in numbers. Events – whether subjective experiences or historical landmarks – are fixed to certain days, months, and years. Be it the day of one’s birth, the day of death of important persons, the Ides of March or September 11, we all associate certain factual events with certain calendar days. And it is precisely such numbers that form the artistic frame of reference of the German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009). “One + One is one two. Two is one two. That is my original thesis for all the laws that mathematically run through my work. I write mathematical literature and mathematical music,” is how Hanne Darboven described her aesthetic approach.<sup>1</sup> She saw herself less as an artist than as a constructivist: “I build something up by disturbing something (destruction – structure – construction). A system became necessary.”<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, Darboven developed a very specific system for her artistic treatment of ciphers: They are added, combined and varied, written out in numbers or as words, visualized as lines or cubes and transferred into musical notation and thus her artworks oscillate between a kind of artistic arith-

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1 As cited in: Kleine 2016: 53. Note: English translations of the quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author of this paper, who takes full responsibility for any errors. Original quote: “Eins + Eins ist eins zwei. Zwei ist eins zwei. Das ist meine Urthese für alle Gesetze, die bei mir mathematisch durchlaufen. Ich schreibe mathematische Literatur und mathematische Musik.”

2 Darboven 1999: 62.

metic and geometry in her frame of reference.<sup>3</sup> In so-called daily calculations (“Tagesrechnungen”), she adds up year and day data, resulting in cross totals (“Quersummen”), construction- or K-values (“Konstruktions- oder K-Werte”). Darboven always follows the same scheme she developed: the day and month of the Gregorian calendar are each treated as a unit and added to the last two digits of the calendar year, which are treated as separate, to determine the construction value. Her birthday, as an example, 29 April 1941, results in the construction value 38 in the calculation  $29 + 4 + 4 + 1$  while her date of death on 9 March 2009 would correspond to the calculation  $9 + 3 + 0 + 9 = 21K$ . These ascertained values are the foundation of her works and are represented geometrically, written out in words, transferred into letters of the alphabet or into musical notes.<sup>4</sup>

The moment of temporality gains a completely new dimension and meaning in this processual artistic procedure with calendar data: calendar data as, on the one hand, objective indications of the natural, cyclical course of time and, on the other hand, as an expression of the subjective experience of time, of one’s own experiences and events in the sense of an individual and also collective culture of memory. As such 21 June 1905 ( $21+6+0+5=32K$ ), to which Darboven repeatedly refers (among many other data as, for example, the day of death of Ulrike Meinhof, Mao Zedong or John Lennon) in her major work *Schreibzeit*, which will be dealt with in more detail later in this text, is not just the factual birthday of Jean-Paul Sartre. As a main representative of existentialism, his philosophy provides also significant impulses for the artistic work of Hanne Darboven. “My work is a recording in the sense of existence, it is working through,” hence another characteristic quote from the artist about her artistic approach.<sup>5</sup>

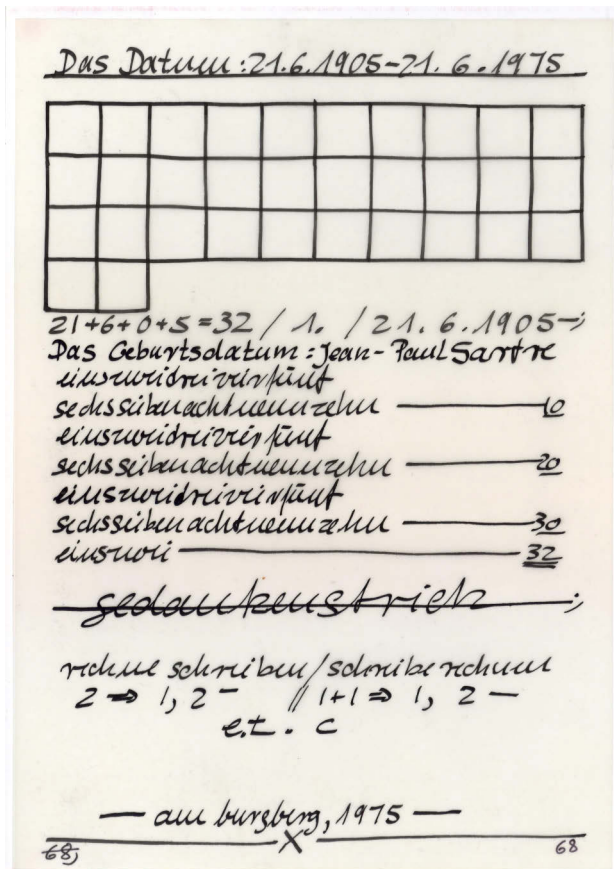
By presenting individual sheets with the diverse representations of the daily calculations – which in Darboven’s respective works often count several thousand – framed and hung on the walls of exhibition venues, the works gain an additional specific aesthetic quality of spatialization and visualization of the category of time. In their installation-like, yet processual character, the works create a relationship between the individual sheets that is no longer

3 Cf. Bippus 1999: 18–19.

4 On specific compositional techniques in Darboven’s oeuvre cf. Voithofer 2021.

5 Darboven, in: <https://www.hanne-darboven.org/kuenstlerin/lebenslauf/> (26.05.2022). Original quote: “Meine Arbeit ist ein Aufzeichnen im Sinne von Dasein, es ist Durcharbeitung.”

Figure 1: Hanne Darboven, "Schreibzeit" (1975-1999)



(c) Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg

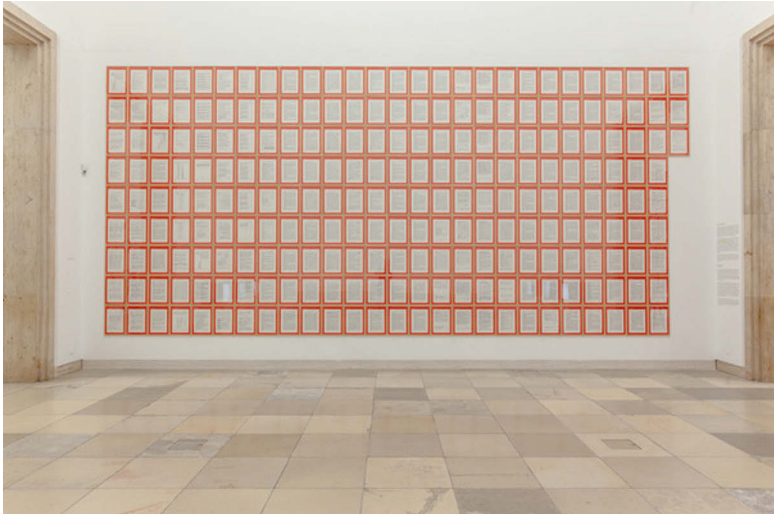
merely horizontal but equally vertical, no longer merely unidimensional but equally anachronistical and intermedial and can be conceived as a total work of art.<sup>6</sup>

Working with numbers is something highly artificial. Ciphers are never mere objects that stand alone but always refer to something – a quantity, size

6 Cf. Bippus 1999: 20–21.

or, in this case, time. “It’s not pure number and has other meanings. If I were making it up, I couldn’t possibly write all that. It has to be totally simple to be *real writing*,” says Darboven about her artistic approach to numbers.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2: Hanne Darboven, Exhibition “Hanne Darboven: Aufklärung – Zeitgeschichten. Eine Retrospektive”, Munich, Haus der Kunst 2015



(c) Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg

## 2. Writing Frenzy

Alongside arithmetic procedures, writing is the fundamental process in Darboven’s oeuvre. “Writing, not describing,” is her artistic credo in this context.<sup>8</sup> From 1971 onwards, Darboven integrates a wide variety of text types into her work. In the extensive, lengthy, torturous process of transcribing texts – primarily in the German language –, such as the first five cantos from Homer’s *Odyssey*, the epilogue from Bertolt Brecht’s *Kriegsfiabel*, excerpts from poems by

7 As cited in: Lippard 1976: 190.

8 As cited in: *ibid.*: 187. Original quote: “Schreiben, nicht beschreiben.”

Kraus, Hölderlin, Brecht, Schwitters, Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* or Rückert's "Die Schöpfung ist zur Ruh' gegangen, o wach' in mir" and entries from the Brockhaus-Encyclopedia (such as "proletariat" ["Proletariat"]) or the page "cauliflower to flower vases" ("Blumenkohl bis Blumenvasen"), it is the depiction of the internalization and incorporation of these very testimonies of time that is expressed in Darboven's works. The daily calculations ("Tagesrechnungen") are joined by the daily writing ("Tagesschrift") which in the form of uniformly meandering waves – art historian Elke Bippus speaks of "u-bows" ("u-Bögen")<sup>9</sup> as an adaptation of ditto marks used to mark word repetition – recreates in a mantra-like gesture the act of writing itself, the "writing without words."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, her daily writing with its undulating loops also reveals vibrant, rhythmic aspects. In reductionist, insistent repetition – a technique very similar to the procedures of minimal music – a spatial expansion of the perceptual dimension takes place.

Hanne Darboven's opus magnum is appropriately titled *Schreibzeit* (*Writing Time*). The majority of the work was written between 1975 and 1981, and it consists of a monumental volume of almost 4,000 pages, sorted into twenty numbered DIN-A4 and DIN-A3 binders which Darboven herself did not want to be understood as a work of art but as a "political-cultural-historical book" addressed to "everyone."<sup>11</sup> The lengthy process of creating *Schreibzeit* took over 20 years, during which Darboven assembled an extremely diverse wealth of material of text types spanning the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having provided the work with an index, one can consult it to find that its index of names lists about 1,100 entries.<sup>12</sup>

In its early parts, Darboven devotes herself to transcribing parts of *Die Wörter*, a German version of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographical book *Les Mots* (*The Words*); an interview with Sartre in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* published in June 1975 on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday under the title "Ich müßte sehr niedergeschlagen sein" ("I should be very depressed"), in which Sartre comments on the fundamental importance of writing in his life; and the interview "Das ewig Weibliche ist eine Lüge" ("The eternal feminine is a lie") by Alice Schwarzer with Simone de Beauvoir, also published in *Der Spiegel* a year later in April 1976.

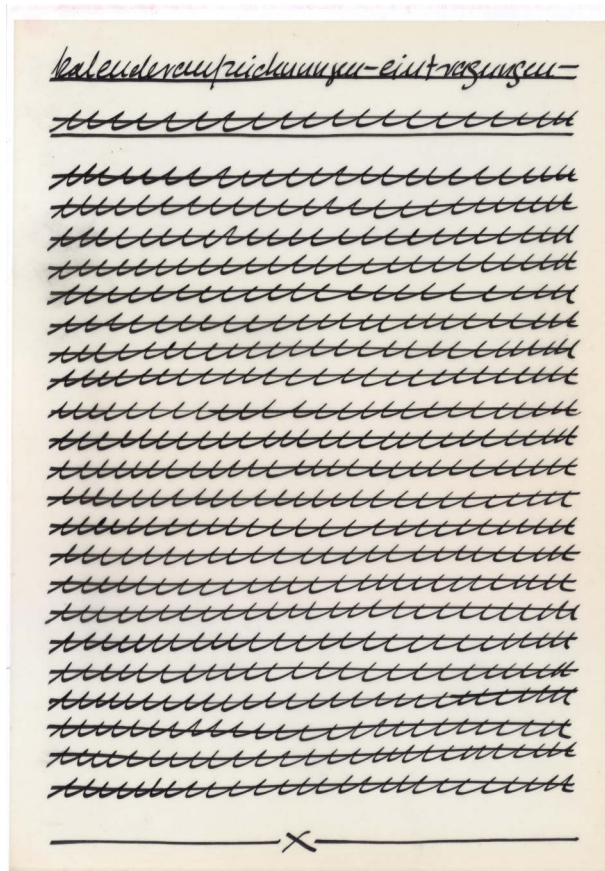
9 Cf. Bippus 1999: 19–20.

10 Cf. *ibid.*: 25.

11 Cf. Jussen 2000: 15.

12 Cf. Busche 1999: 146.

Figure 3: Hanne Darboven, "Schreibzeit" (1975-1999)



(c) Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg

The publication and production history of *Schreibzeit* is long and convoluted, in part due to the work's mammoth scope. It is worth providing a brief overview of its construction history, in order to also give a sense of the work as a whole. Darboven produced the largest part of *Schreibzeit*, more than 2,000 pages, in 1976. Two years later, in 1978, she created the self-contained work

*Bismarckzeit*, which she subsequently declared to be part of *Schreibzeit*.<sup>13</sup> In it, the artist engages – over the course of 900 sheets – with the historical Bismarck era. Or more precisely: She deals with the time of the Prussian Prime Minister and later Chancellor of the German Empire Otto von Bismarck in the period from 1850 to 1890 and sets it in dialogue with themes, events and politics of the then present, the year 1978. One can read not only the life data of Otto von Bismarck but also of his political opponent August Bebel – always accompanied by daily calculations on the respective calendar dates. Furthermore, a transcript of excerpts from the biography of Bismarck by Ludwig Reiners (published in 1970) and the cultural-historical account of that era by Rudolf Malsch (*Deutsche Kultur. Eine geistesgeschichtliche Fibel*, 1951) is interpolated into the work.<sup>14</sup> Darboven relates these historical documents in *Bismarckzeit* to then topical testimonies, such as, for example, an essay by Willy Brandt from 1978 printed in the *Sozialdemokratisches Magazin* with the title "Wir müssen wachsam sein" ("We must be vigilant"), in which Brandt refers to the anti-socialist laws passed under Bismarck. Connections are also made to everyday utilitarian objects from Darboven's personal collection of domestic objects, such as quotes from porcelain plates, like "Einer spinnt immer wenn 2 spinnen wird's schlimmer" ("One is always crazy when two are crazy it gets worse").

Moreover, in *Schreibzeit* Darboven also includes photographs of items that symbolize technological progress – from a cradle to a compass, a globe, a telescope, an ophthalmic optics device or a steam engine. While working on *Schreibzeit*, Darboven was also laying the foundations for her extensive collection of three-dimensional objects (such as everyday utilitarian objects, toys, antiques, musical instruments, mannequins, historical postcards, souvenirs, or objects she herself commissioned to be made), which are integrated into many of her installations, providing a further medial dimension to the work.<sup>15</sup>

It is not until the 1990s that Darboven added a prologue and an epilogue to *Schreibzeit* which consist of about 500 photographic reproductions of books. The prologue shows the photographic reproduction of pages from a historical publication on battles during the Seven Years' War entitled *Gespräche im Reiche derer Todten* (*Conversations in the Realm of the Dead*, 1792). The epilogue shows the 1975 financial record book of the "Strandhalle" in Over at the Süderelbe

13 Cf. *ibid.*

14 Honnef 1999: 37.

15 Cf. Kleine 2016: 52–53.

(close to Hanne Darboven's home and place of work, Hamburg-Harburg), in which the kiosk operator Helga Mahlwitz noted the sale of various drinks using tally marks.<sup>16</sup> After the publication of *Schreibzeit* in autumn 1999 by the Max-Planck-Institute for History in Göttingen, the work could be considered complete.

The historian Bernhard Jussen rightly asks how one should deal with *Schreibzeit* from a scholarly perspective as a volume of contemporary historical and art-historical documents which Darboven herself saw not as a work of art but as a “political-cultural-historical book.”<sup>17</sup> Although *Schreibzeit* closely adheres to the format of scientific work with its pagination and source references, the work is, as it were, a fragmentation of individual- and world-history with its renunciation of “chronological linearity.”<sup>18</sup> Jussen speaks of a “hermetic offer” of historiography in *Schreibzeit*.<sup>19</sup> Darboven is thus a chronicler and scriptwriter of her own deeply subjective experience of the world which she reproduces in her work according to her very own rules, using the detritus of popular history and ephemera, engaging therefore in a conversation with common daily experience through reproductions of weekly magazines or postcards.

### 3. Archival Art – Its Disclosure of Power Structures and Epistemology

In *Schreibzeit* – as in all of her works –, Hanne Darboven interweaves individual and collective memory by incorporating various semantic reference systems from history, politics and art. The essential moment here is the fusion of subjective experiences with historically recorded events. The contents are inextricably merged in their form and related to each other. Darboven refers to the extra-artistic reality of historical facts and critically reflects and comments on this seemingly objective reality. In doing so, she always makes her intervention in the documents clear and thus follows the artist's self-image as a commenting outsider, an engaged contemporary and a chronicler who must take a political stand.

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16 Cf. Busche 1999: 155.

17 Cf. Jussen 2000: 28–30.

18 Cf. *ibid.*: 34.

19 Cf. *ibid.*: 40.

Jussen hence rightly points out that Darboven's approach differs fundamentally from that of historians, as she does not attach importance to completeness and linearity in the representation of history in her works. In this context, however, it can be asked whether it is not precisely through her artistic treatment of historical facts that the problematic nature of a general historiography as such, its fragility and gaps, are revealed. Under what criteria and conditions do historical narratives emerge? What is considered a historically important fact? What becomes the historical canon and by whom? What events, on the other hand, can be carelessly forgotten and why?

Furthermore, it can be questioned whether it is through her curation and reproduction of historical documents that her personal interpretation and socio-cultural imprint opens up new dimensions and perspectives on the representation of history (in the case of *Schreibzeit* to a very specific section of German cultural history). To what extent, then, does Darboven's work offer epistemological implications?

According to art historian Hans Dickel, Darboven's work examines historiography for its meaningfulness, puts it up for discussion and makes the political dimension explicit in the process: "By calling up historical data, facts and narratives and putting them up for disposal, she contributes to the deconstruction of 'history', disenchants it in its apparent meaningfulness. Instead of an overarching creation of meaning, modern artistic means are used to convey a questioning of meaning."<sup>20</sup> In returning to Darboven's statement, quoted at the beginning of this paper, in which she sees herself not as an artist but as a constructivist, it can be noted, that she disturbs a system – the system of historiography – deconstructs its structure, rebuilds it and reassesses it.

Art critic Hal Foster detects an "archival impulse" in contemporary art since the postwar period in currents and artistic movements such as conceptual art, institutional critique, and feminist art – to which Darboven must be related.<sup>21</sup> According to Foster, the archive is the starting point for those art practices that work with historical information. While Foster does not name

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20 Cf. Dickel 2016: 104. Original quote: "Indem sie historische Daten, Fakten und Erzählungen aufruft, zur Disposition stellt, trägt sie zur Dekonstruktion von 'Geschichte' bei, entzaubert sie in ihrer scheinbaren Sinnhaftigkeit. Anstelle übergreifender Sinnstiftung wird mit modernen künstlerischen Mitteln eher eine Sinnbefragung vermittelt."

21 Cf. Foster 2004: 3.

Darboven amongst the artists he observes to possess such “impulse” (e.g., the Independent Group, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Prince), Darboven can decidedly be placed in this movement. Following Foster’s definition of an archival art, her works are “recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible, and as such they call out for human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing.”<sup>22</sup> The selection of the documents is subject to the highly individual decision of the artist, who thereby takes a self-reflexive stance on her own identity, socio-cultural imprint, art tradition and political life. Foster also speaks of an “anomic fragmentation as a condition not only to represent but to work through.” In proposing “new orders of affective association,” archival art does not only represent but must also be interpreted.<sup>23</sup> Darboven uses documentary approaches, disrupts, and criticizes the traditional order and functioning of cultural memory. She brings questions of authorship and overlooked or failed ideas from art, philosophy, politics, or everyday life back into focus by installing a kind of counter or complementary memory.<sup>24</sup>

Philosopher Jacques Derrida draws attention to the original meaning of the word archive from the Greek *arkheion*:

[...] initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. [...] The archons are first of all the document’s guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives.<sup>25</sup>

In this respect, it can be stated that in *Schreibzeit* Darboven not only appropriates factual documents and events from history but also critically reveals and questions the process of archiving documents from history itself. That hermeneutic power of interpreting the archives, which was withheld from the archons, Darboven transfers into her work. She takes the right to (re)interpret factual reports, to place them in various non-linear contexts and to place everyday occurrences – the banal – alongside the supposedly important events or historical landmarks on equal terms. Patriarchal power structures

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22 Ibid.: 5.

23 Ibid.: 21.

24 Cf. *ibid.*: 21–22.

25 Derrida 1995: 9–10.

of exclusion are thereby exposed. Questions of relevance and the "biographical unworthiness" of certain groups of people can thus be raised.<sup>26</sup> What and who should be included in a canon of history? What is worth preserving in an archive? Who determines what ultimately finds its way into cultural memory?

The selective documents of *Schreibzeit* are on the one hand a mirror of personal imprints, Darboven's role models and reference works. The great ancestors, who are still seen as influencing reference points of her own tradition – whether positively in the sense of providing important impulses or in the negative turning away from them – are hauntologically evoked.

On the other hand, *Schreibzeit* with the many and disparate archival documents gathered within it, can be read as an expression of cultural memory. In the 1920s, cultural studies scholar Aby Warburg worked out his theory of "social memory," to which the concepts of "cultural memory" and "cultural memory spaces" created by the cultural scientists Jan and Aleida Assmann were related and further elaborated. Cultural memory is a collective term for all the knowledge with which a specific group identifies itself in a specific framework; differentiates itself from other groups; and transmits, reproduces and adapts this knowledge. It is composed of "memory figures," significant events in the past, artistic products and "institutionalized communication."<sup>27</sup> In the self-reflexive debate, cultural memory always takes a stand on itself, is criticized and revised. As Jan Assmann notes: "Cultural memory exists in two modes: firstly, in the mode of potentiality as an archive, as a total horizon of accumulated texts, images, patterns of action, and secondly in the mode of actuality, as the stock of objectified meaning updated and perspectivized from a respective present."<sup>28</sup>

Darboven's artistic work with the archive is a "self-reflexive memory work." "For the artists are not concerned with technical memories, but with a 'treasure of suffering' in which they recognize an artistic fund," says Aleida Assmann.<sup>29</sup> *Schreibzeit* oscillates between individual and cultural memory

26 Cf. Schweiger 2009: 32.

27 Cf. Assmann 1988: 9–12.

28 Ibid.: 13. Original quote: "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis existiert in zwei Modi: einmal im Modus der Potentialität als Archiv, als Totalhorizont angesammelter Texte, Bilder, Handlungsmuster, und zum zweiten im Modus der Aktualität, als der von einer jeweiligen Gegenwart aus aktualisierte und perspektivierte Bestand an objektiviertem Sinn."

29 Assmann 1999: 22. Original quote: "Denn es geht den Künstlern nicht um technische Speicher, sondern um einen 'Leidschatz', in dem sie einen künstlerischen Fundus erkennen."

and is thus in a certain sense a mirror and affirmation of the current state of art's tradition anchored in cultural memory.

This documentarism, in which original, authentic documents on history find their way into the work, also has the epistemological potential to create knowledge. One learns not only something about the time from which the materials come but also about how archival studies deal with source material per se. Cultural studies scholar Susanne Knaller sees great potential in the strategies of artistic documentarism with regard to epistemological and ontological considerations as well as socio-critical functions. Documentarism brings concepts of reality, forms of time and models of truth up for discussion and is thus also helpful for meta-reflection on various discourses of science.<sup>30</sup>

Hanne Darboven incorporates history through her writing. *Schreibzeit* consists of the sum of its parts and works relentlessly and openly with ambiguities. In it one becomes aware that historiography is not a static end product but is subject to constant dynamic processes of established norms and values of a culture, in which new insights into the past are brought to light. By asserting the right to (re)interpret and (re)evaluate documents from the archives of history, Darboven not only demonstrates with her work the power to create knowledge but also offers facts that transcend aesthetic concerns.

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30 Cf. Knaller 2010: 175.

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