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“Fear of Knowledge”

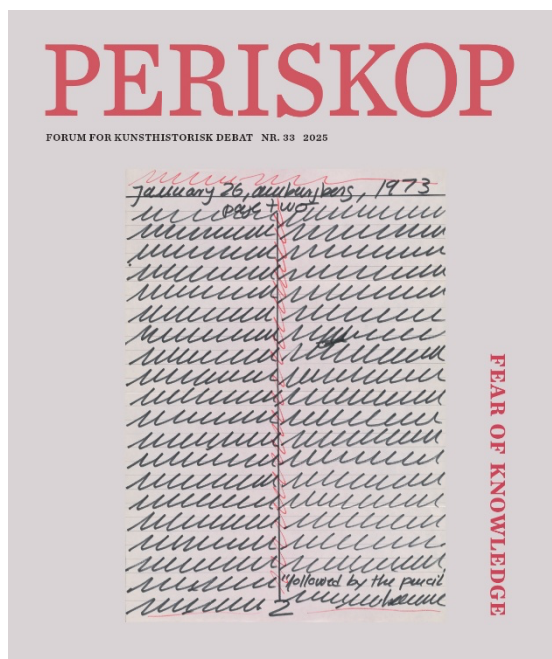
Titel: Un/Writing “Woman” and its Epistemological Implications in Hanne Darboven’s 1970s Writing Practice

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January 26, ~~Amherst~~ ^{day hills to cart to cart to NY City}, 1973

dear Lucy, your so, ———;
post-card ——— in Nov, 1972
can't tell you i wrote too you:
today the date "i don't" have to
when i will be in fight for being
NYC, i guess ——— and so on
the end of march end so far :---
or the beginning just what i do
of april ———; and can end
see you there; want to repeat
and Lucy — today, ~~will~~
do what you art is art
do and want a man a man
to do, — i do a woman a woman
my am a woman, writing, ~~he~~
all best ———

no explanation — no
did you not hear this before

Un/Writing “Woman” and its Epistemological Implications in Hanne Darboven’s 1970s Writing Practice

When you asked me to speak about women and fiction, I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant.

(VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own* (1929))

“i am a woman, writing, hanne” — these words go back to a letter that the German Conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) sent to the American curator and feminist Lucy R. Lippard on January 26, 1973 [1].¹ The letter begins with Darboven’s vague response to a postcard Lippard previously sent inquiring about her next visit to New York.² Subsequently, the artist addresses what appears to be a longstanding disagreement between the two correspondents: “and lucy do what you do and want to do — I do so.” These words recognize the differing opinions between the two, indicating Darboven’s respectful acceptance and even support of Lippard’s different approach, all while emphasizing that the artist remains steadfast in her own views. Additionally, Darboven reminds Lippard that she already expressed her stance in a letter back in November 1972. After reaffirming her position by stating “art is art / a man a man / a woman a woman,” Darboven concludes her letter with the emphatic words, “i am a woman, writing, hanne.” Only at this moment it becomes clear that the letter addresses the burgeoning feminist initiatives in 1970s art, which Lippard was spearheading.³

[1] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard, January 26, 1973 (page one)*, Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Thus, it is only here, at the end of the letter, that we encounter the reasons for Lippard's and Darboven's differing opinions. But more interestingly, Darboven's letter and its poignant closing words effectively position Darboven in relation to both the feminist efforts in art in the US and the patriarchal structures that necessitated them in the first place.

In fact, this conversation between Lippard and Darboven appears to have emerged in the context of the preparations for the curator's final "numbers show,"⁴ which featured Darboven along with 25 other women artists working in Conceptual art at the beginning of the 1970s.⁵ Launched at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts, May 14–18, 1973) and titled *c. 7,500* after the population of Valencia, California, its inaugural location, this all-women traveling show continued to another nine venues.⁶ As it was the first show to merge a feminist agenda with an experimental curatorial style (Morris 2012; Butler, C. 2012), *c. 7,500* holds a significant position in the history of the politically inflected Conceptual art.

Moreover, Darboven's engagement with women's issues may have begun in 1972, but it has certainly not stopped then. It can be traced back in the artist's correspondence, works, and particularly in her participation in feminist and women-only exhibitions (such as *c. 7,500*) at least until 1999.⁷ These largely overseen entanglements between Darboven and feminist efforts (primarily in the US) offer a productive framework, establishing a connection between her writing and the category of "woman," and thus a new perspective on her writing practice.

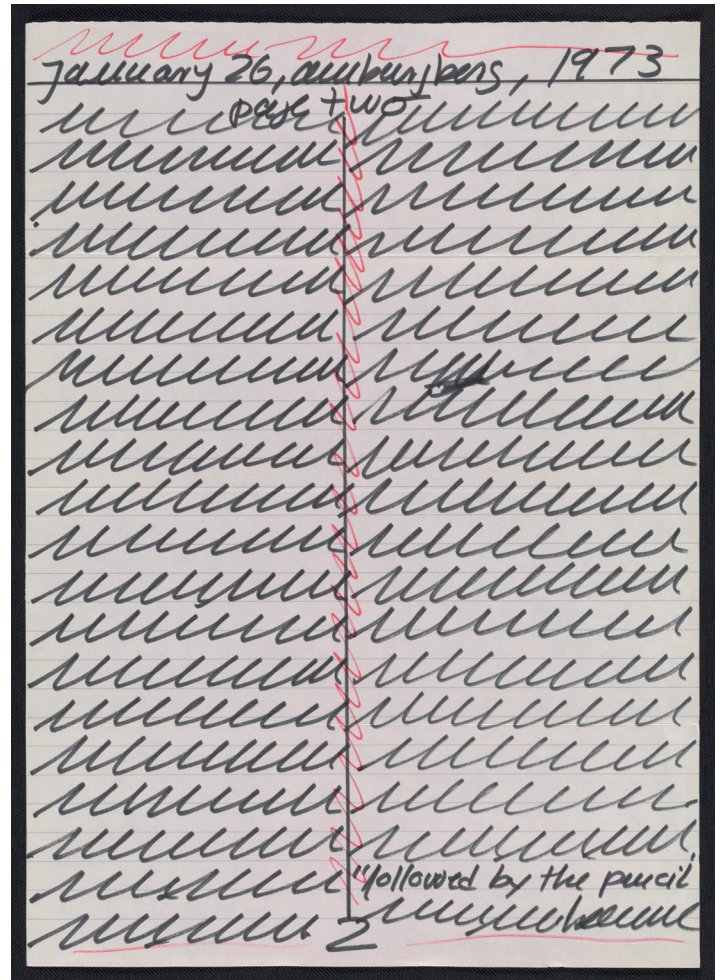
I argue that Darboven's statement "i am a woman, writing, hanne" should be regarded as the artist's own stance toward the increasingly polarized situation at the beginning of the 1970s, which implicitly requested women artists to take sides: either to join – if permitted – what Lippard called the "male mainstream," (1976, 5), and play by those rules, or engage in the newly emerging feminist efforts in art. Through her writing practice, as I will demonstrate, Darboven chose to chart her own course while remaining in dialogue with the feminist initiatives in art, contradicting the artist's disavowal that "women's issues" were not a concern of hers (e.g. Darboven 1989, 32). By highlighting that Darboven's writing practice is rooted in a gendered position, the statement introduces significant implications for the artist's writing-based oeuvre and calls for an overall reevaluation by acknowledging this primacy.

In this article, I aim to establish a foundation for this task by first situating these declaratory words within their emerging context: Lippard's show *c. 7,500*. Second, I explore one possibility of engaging with this new perspective on

Darboven's writing practice by focusing on the processuality and performativity of writing, which, as the structure of Darboven's closing words suggests, are the common ground for both gender and self. While this opens up a complex field of investigation, my overarching questions, following the focus of this special issue, are quite specific: Under the assumption that writing is inextricably connected with knowledge production, what knowledge is being produced (and presented) by Darboven's writing practice at the nexus between art, gender and self? My specific intent here is to illuminate the epistemological implications introduced by Darboven's statement "i am a woman, writing, hanne," and the conflicts and contradictions it seems to deliberately produce, targeting the very category of "woman." As I will demonstrate, writing serves as an act that both writes (or establishes) and unwrites "woman," as writing into illegibility. Viewed as an intervention into established knowledge (authorized by institutions, discourses, practices etc.) and the reality they produce, these contradictions create the possibility for resignification by revealing the instability of the categories that shape and define (and delineate) our understanding of the world. This intervention is initiated from a specific: that of a woman artist writing within the patriarchal art world of the 1970s.

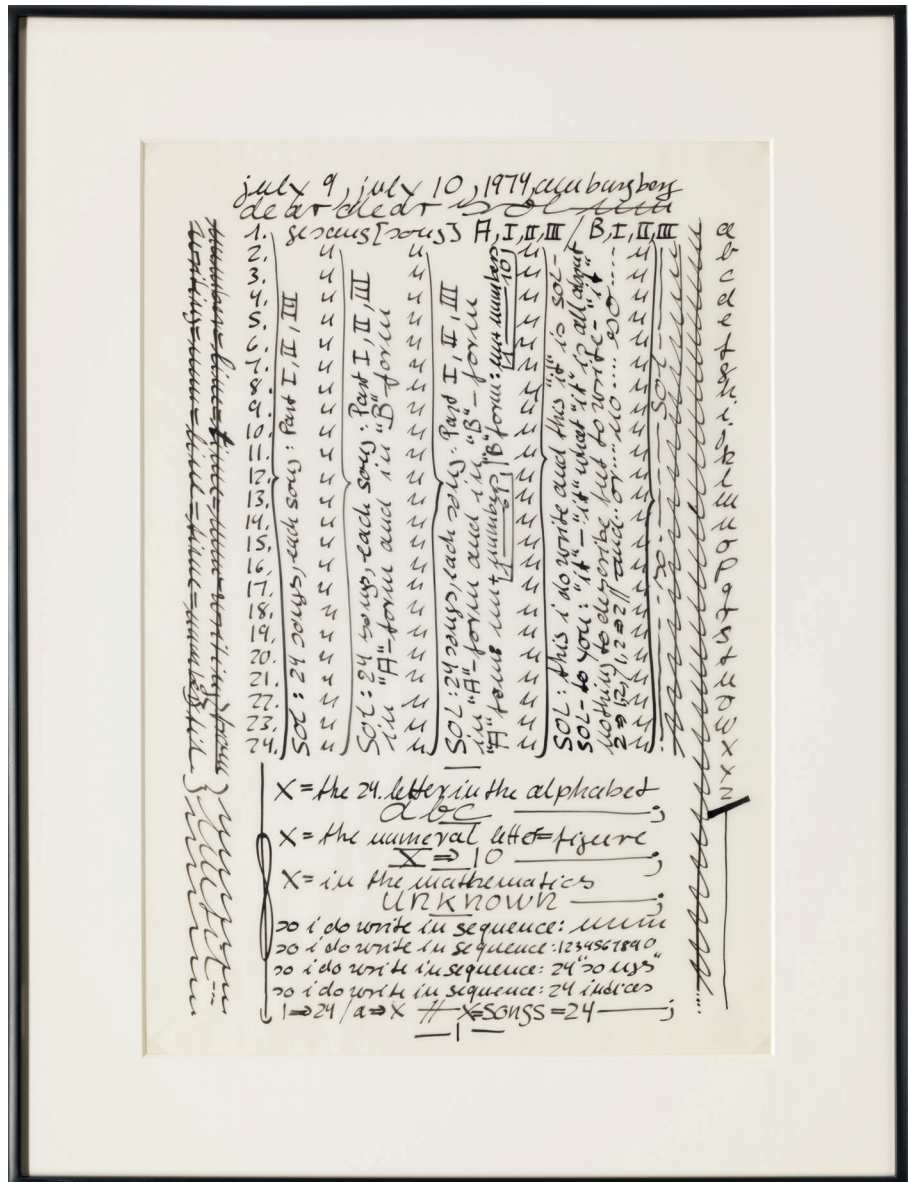
Writing as Fighting

Before starting my investigation, I want to highlight the idiosyncratic status of the correspondence in Darboven's practice, as this will clarify why Darboven's letters to Lippard hold such a central position in this article. First, Darboven described her overall writing practice as her "doing" or "it," which suggests a rejection of the category of art, thereby situating it within the quotidian, as

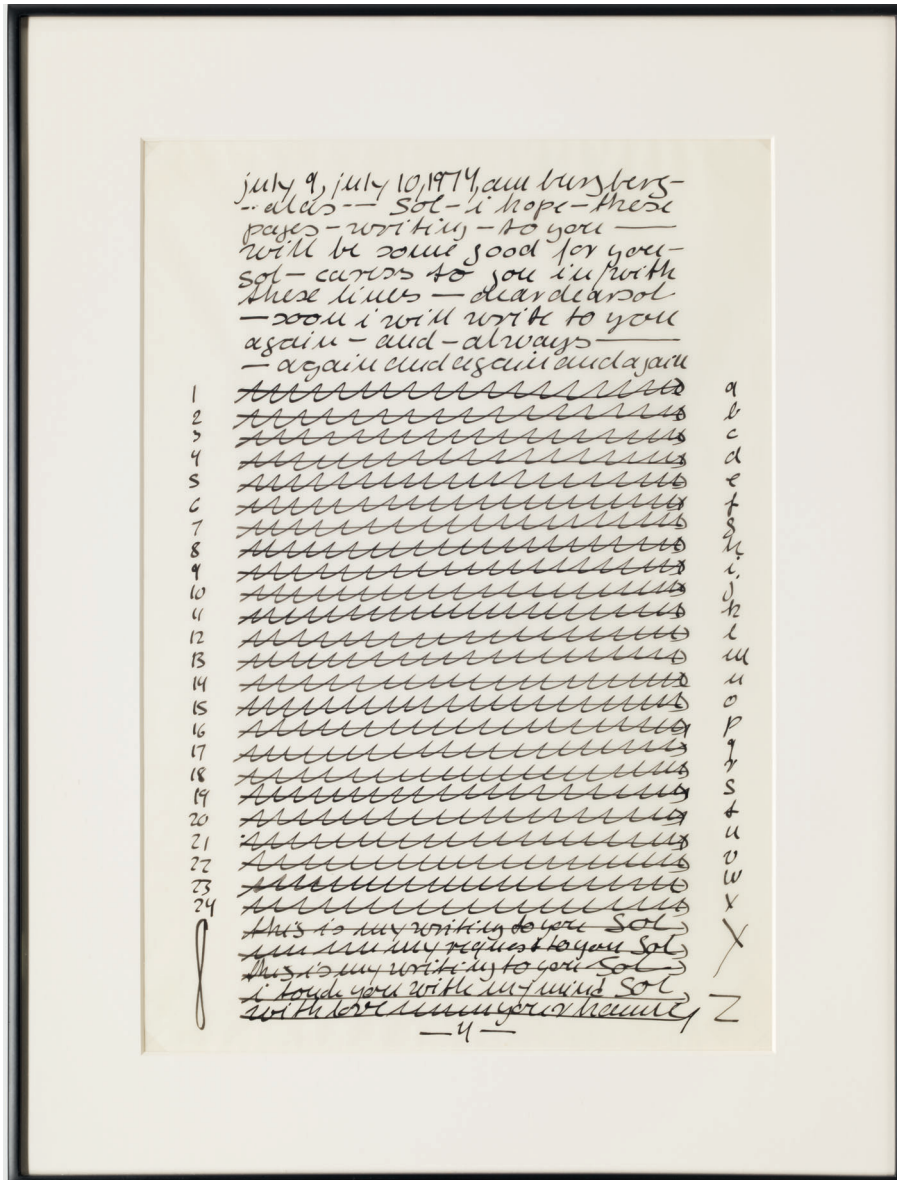


[2] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard, January 26, 1973 (page two)*, Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art (page two), Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

perhaps an everyday life practice.⁸ Secondly, there are some strong indicators that the artist was interested in blurring the distinction between writing a letter and writing a piece of “art,” and thus between what can be regarded as the private and the public sphere, respectively. Darboven has not only published her correspondence with family, friends, and professional network,⁹ but also incorporated the same quotes from various literary works in both her correspondence and



[3] Fig. 3: Hanne Darboven, Letter (page 1), from the portfolio “Letter and Indices to 24 Songs”, Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Carol and Sol LeWitt, © Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.197.1



[4] Fig. 4: Hanne Darboven, Letter (page 4), from the portfolio "Letter and Indices to 24 Songs", Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Sol and Carol LeWitt, © Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2001.1974

art practice. Furthermore, we find similar visual strategies in her artistic work and correspondence alike. Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel (2015), for instance, consider Darboven's letters to be a type of "experimental objects" (20) with a "hybrid status between the things" (52), yet an integral part of her oeuvre.

An example in the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University illustrates their in-between status convincingly [3–4]. The portfolio of 16 sheets, a gift from

Sol LeWitt to the museum, displays a letter to LeWitt himself, followed by the indices for a piece that Darboven worked on in 1974. All 16 sheets are framed, whereby no distinction is made between the letter and the indices, both of which are classified as ink drawings. While the decision to frame them as a cohesive body of work was most likely LeWitt's, it nonetheless demonstrates the letter's ability to serve as both art and correspondence, leaving the classification up to the recipient.¹⁰ Conversely, and perhaps more interestingly, Darboven chose to present her magnum opus, *Schreibzeit* (Writing Time), as a piece of correspondence of sorts by addressing it to "everyone" [5].¹¹ Also, Darboven included her name and home address, thus opening up the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with the readers of her work.

This gesture of explicitly addressing her thousands of pages of *Schreibzeit* to "everyone" draws attention to how writing letters functions as a way of constituting an "I" in the very act of presenting oneself to, and thus anticipating, an interlocutor, a "you." Indeed, writing letters has already been acknowledged and used as a technique of forming the self in Greco-Roman antiquity (Foucault 1984).

Following this, with her statement, "i am a woman, writing, hanne," Darboven effectively presents herself – and thus insists on being perceived – as a woman, writing. An asterisk above the word "writing" leads to an addition that Darboven included between the two columns of her 1973 letter to Lippard. It reads: "Did you not now (sic!) this befor (sic!) – no explanation – no" [1]. This sentence gives Darboven's closing words an uncompromising tone, while also emphasizing that her position on the matter is represented by her writing practice alone. These stark words seem to already find their implementation on the second page of Darboven's letter [2]. Consisting of a form of asemic writing – i.e. writing that does not communicate a message but highlights its graphiological dimension (see e.g. Schwenger 2019) – these waves, which emulate writing, emphasize their aesthetic and processual dimensions, rather than providing any explanatory remarks or further contextualization of Darboven's position.

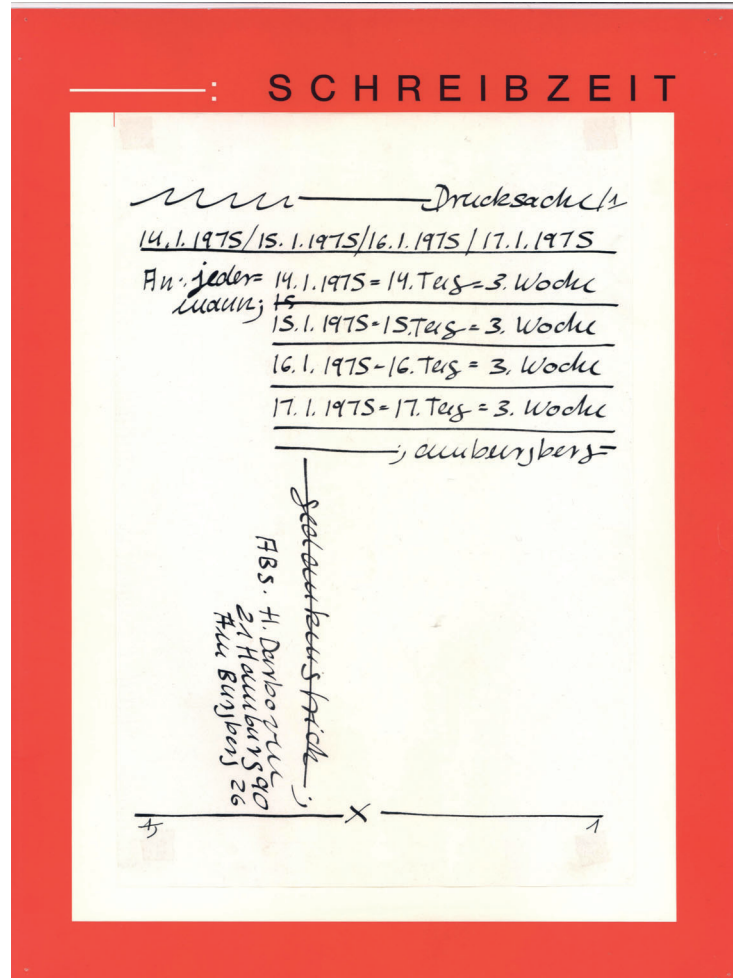
In fact, the letter from November 1972 that Darboven refers to in her later dispatch to Lippard raises the question of writing as a political strategy. Here, Darboven addresses the theme of gender – likely among the first times – and links it to her writing practice.¹² The passage reads:

and to you today: because / i am a woman, i do fight / for man ———, / i don't have
to fight for being / a woman, because i am a / woman – because i am a / woman,
i do fight for man -; / art is a piece of work, not every / piece of work is art, but

what / else can art be than art? /
 i do fight no more [wavy line] i
 write* [my emphasis]

What makes this passage particularly noteworthy is that Darboven establishes here a nexus between art, the gender binary (the very framework of second-wave feminism), and her writing practice, while also underlying that it is inextricably linked to a fight she has given up in favor of writing. Darboven returned to this statement in her writings and interviews at least five times from 1972 to 1978,¹³ albeit dropping the reference to writing, perhaps because it seemed unnecessarily obvious. Most notably, in *Schreibzeit*, the gender binary is questioned by emphasizing that the fight is carried out in the name of human beings.¹⁴ Darboven appears to advocate for a universalist stance that seeks to transcend gender binary categories, while also suggesting that this objective can be effectively realized from a woman's subject position.

While we remain in the dark about why this is the case, the quoted passage further touches upon art's limitations in conducting this fight, and to Darboven's substitution of fighting with writing. In addition to raising doubts about whether Darboven considers her writing art, these lines pose questions regarding the political impulse linked to the fight under these circumstances: Has it vanished in Darboven's shift from fighting to writing? Or has it been redirected into her writing, potentially as a more fitting means for waging this struggle? This necessitates first an exploration of Darboven's concept and practice of writing and, second, a consideration of the context in which this writing practice emerged.



[5] Hanne Darboven, *Schreibzeit* (page two), Collage, Offset, Copies, 3364 sheets, each 42 x 29,7 cm, exhibition version ca. 1980, Hanne Darboven Stiftung, Hamburg, Hanne Darboven / © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Hanne Darboven Stiftung

“i am a woman, writing, hanne”

A notable detail that emerges when examining the sentence “i am a woman, writing, hanne” helps clarify Darboven’s idea of writing: the verb “writing” is in the present continuous tense, introducing some significant implications. To begin with, it showcases Darboven’s view of writing as a continuous pursuit. Writing is presented as an ongoing process rather than a means to an end, such as writing *poetry* or writing *a Conceptual work*. This understanding of writing as a perpetual activity not directed towards a specific product corresponds to Roland Barthes’ notion of writing as an intransitive verb: The writer is, according to Barthes, “the one who writes – absolutely” (1989, 18).

Darboven’s monumental, writing-based oeuvre stands testimony to her commitment to this concept of writing, whereby the single works function as “momentary figuration” (Bippus 2015, 187). But the 1973 letter to Lippard too presents us with two aspects related to this form of writing: On the one hand, there is the aforementioned asemic writing that shifts the focus from writing as a means of communication to writing as an activity, which has been referred to as “pure inscription” (Lange-Berndt and Rübel 2015, 49) or as “brain waves” (Lippard 1973, 35). The focus lies here on the interplay between corporeality, the writing instrument, the employed writing technique (or perhaps more accurately, the pattern), and the paper, whereby a more complex concept of writing emerges – one that transcends the idea of writing as merely a means for transmitting information (see e.g. Campe 2021). Returning to the assumption that writing is tightly linked to knowledge production, this concept of writing in Darboven’s practice then introduces a significant shift: The production of knowledge is linked to the process of writing and also to its performative dimension (see e.g. Austin 1962).

As previously mentioned, by penning the phrase “i am a woman, writing, hanne,” Darboven explicitly embraces this gender identity while at the time establishing its inextricable connection to writing. This encourages an examination of their relationship. Darboven’s statement may be regarded as a simple description: the artist is a woman named “hanne” who writes. The structure of the statement suggests that the category “woman” acts as a reference in the writing process, implying an ongoing engagement with it. In other words, it seems that “woman” serves as a permanent reference in relation to which the writing takes shape. This raises questions about the impact of writing on the concept of “woman” and, conversely, about how writing is shaped when conducted from this gendered position.

The sentence features simultaneously a performative dimension, which adds another layer and further complicates my considerations: It is with the

writing itself that this gender identity is attributed to the “I,” the subject of the sentence. This constitutive act appeals to the performative aspect of language and, most importantly, presents the writing act as the construction of the artist-subject as a woman within the act of writing. “i am a woman, writing, hanne” functions as an instantiation of these words within the writing process. Against this background, the “I,” the subject, is simultaneously created with/in the activity of writing: created as a woman who writes. Or, to put it in Emile Benveniste’s words: “This is a consequence of the fact that the instance of discourse that contains the verb establishes the act at the same time that it sets up the subject” (1986, 732).

The performative instantiation thus presents the writing act as the constitutive force that establishes the subject – a gendered one, as opposed to Benveniste – within writing. Furthermore, in the context of the letter, Darboven’s statement has been introduced and should, therefore, be considered in relation to the tautologies that precede it. Only after writing “art is art / a man a man / a woman a woman” does Darboven close her letter with the consequential line: “i am a woman, writing, hanne.”¹⁵ Notably, Darboven’s statement breaks with the closed circuits of these tautologies. Against this background, “i am a woman, writing, hanne” acts both as a declaration and an oblique positioning towards them. Writing, and specifically writing as an ongoing activity that constitutes a self as a woman writing, set against the unchangeable and undeniable logical “truth” of tautologies, creates an obvious conflict. This irreconcilable conflict raises the question of how this “woman” takes shape in Darboven’s writing practice with even more urgency. In other words, how does writing as an ongoing project impact this assumed gender position (qua writing)? And is this Darboven’s possibly more effective way of fighting?

Writing Contradictions

As previously noted, since Darboven presented her writing in such terms in conversation with Lippard, and within the context of *c. 7,500*, it is essential to examine this particular setting.

Lippard’s traveling exhibition *c. 7,500* converged Conceptual art and feminist impulses, albeit without being explicitly framed as a feminist show. It was conceived as an initiative to increase the visibility of women artists involved in Conceptual art. It showcased a total of 26 artistic positions from North America (U.S. and Canada) and Europe (Germany), such as Darboven, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, and Ulrike Rosenbach (then known as Nolden). These artistic positions demonstrate that Conceptual art, precisely

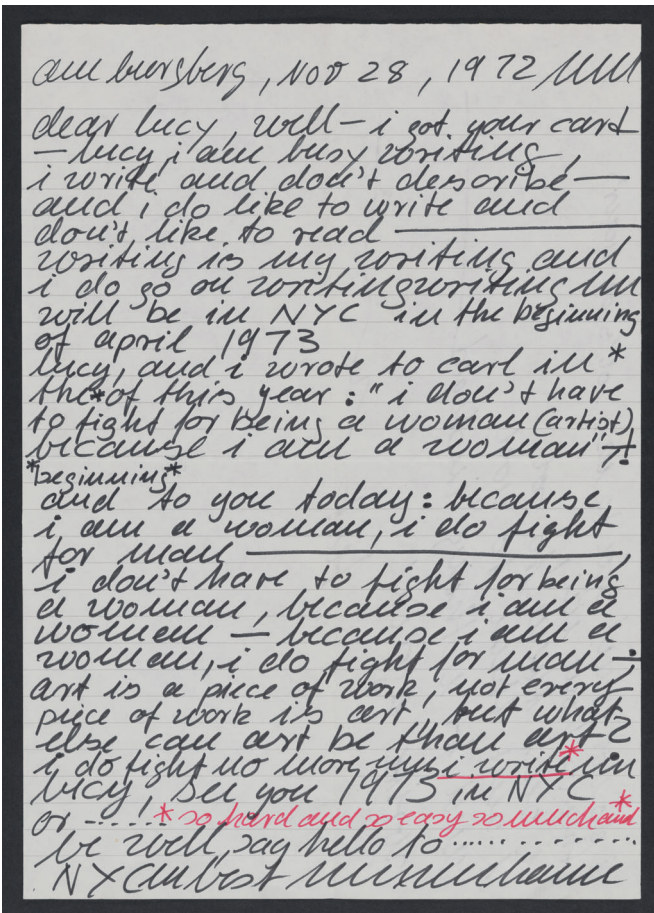
because it allows for a systematic and analytical approach, has proven particularly valuable for explorations into hegemonic narratives or forms of hegemonic knowledge conducted from a feminist or simply from a woman's perspective.

The exhibit highlighted that – contrary to popular opinion – there are many female Conceptual artists while also indicating that Conceptual art was especially appealing to young women artists, enabling them to establish themselves as artists more easily. As Catherine Morris argues, drawing a parallel to video art, Conceptual art was a largely experimental, and thus heterogeneous and dynamic field (with Lippard's *Six Years* serving as its clear evidence), not yet canonized and institutionalized. It possessed no particular market value, since it emphasized unsophisticated and cheap materials, and, more importantly, art historians and critics had not yet intervened and excluded the contributions of women artists in their discussion of Conceptual art (Morris 2012, 21). I would further

argue that the systematic nature of Conceptual art was essential for women artists to acquire knowledge about themselves and their position within a patriarchal society while also serving as an instrument in constituting new subjectivities.

Notwithstanding its importance in establishing “a Conceptual art emanating from life” (Butler, C. 2012, 68) and its urgency considering the particularly discriminatory environment for women artists, Cornelia Butler reminds us that the nascent format of the women-only show was a marginal phenomenon at that time, “doomed to second-class status in its binary opposition to mainstream exhibition-making” (2012, 63). Furthermore, unlike all-male exhibitions, which, although common, were merely seen as art, all-female exhibitions, such as c. 7,500, frequently encountered hostility, even from female critics. A review published in conjunction with the London iteration of the show went so far as to criticize it as a form of ghettoization (Tisdall 1974, reprinted in Butler, C. 2012). Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock sees in this accusation the manifestation of

[6] Hanne Darboven, *Letter to Lucy Lippard*, (November 28, 1972) Lucy Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, © 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich, Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



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[7] Hanne Darboven, *Words*
(page one), Spring 1972 issue of
the New York-based *Avalanche*
magazine, Photo © Stephan
Hauser, Schaulager.

both the underlying “male norm of culture” and the distinct treatment of women-only exhibitions, which are often regarded as “a self-conscious statement about women’s art” (1974, reprinted in Butler, C. 2012). By exposing the male norm in culture, the particular standpoint of women artists holds a critical potential. It highlights how the “male norm in art” actively produces knowledge about what constitutes a “legitimate” art show and, by extension, a “legitimate” art practice and art itself, largely diminishing women’s art to a mere hobby or the pursuit of amateurs.

And yet, it is precisely this opposition to the mainstream art world, coupled with a significant lack of funding and support from public institutions,¹⁶ that enabled (or to a certain degree constrained) c. 7,500 to establish itself as a space where critical artistic positions and curatorial experiments could meet and

[8] Hanne Darboven, *Words* (page five), Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine, Photo © Stephan Hauser, Schaulager.

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advance a feminist agenda. Also significant, although perhaps surprising, is the instrumental role attributed to Darboven and Lee Lozano¹⁷ in Lippard's efforts to develop a vocabulary by which she could accurately address the "brand of Conceptual art made by women," already discernible in her *Six Years* (Butler, C. 2012, 189).¹⁸

Despite her assurance that "women's issues" were no concern of hers, Darboven was among the 26 women featured in this traveling exhibition. Yet, the absence of information about Darboven's work featured in Lippard's show compelled me to choose a different path and reflect instead on the work that Darboven originally planned to submit to c. 7,500, along with Lippard's initial evaluation of the piece.¹⁹ The piece Darboven had in mind for the show was featured in the Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine

[7–9], published by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar. Unfortunately, the magazine had lost parts of the piece, so Darboven had to send 1969 00 → 00 instead.²⁰

Moreover, in a draft of her curatorial statement, Lippard made a remarkable observation about Darboven's work that, interestingly, wasn't included in the final version. Lippard notes that the works of Darboven and Christine Kozlov are "most systematic and unattributable to any sexual origin" (Lucy Lippard Papers, Box 43, folder 21). The fact that Lippard discusses Darboven and Kozlov with respect to gender and retracts this observation in her final version is telling. One reason that comes to mind to explain the subsequent omission is that Lippard may have felt her argument regarding potential differences in women's and men's art was compromised. While emphasizing that "art has no sex, but artists do,"²¹ Lippard indicates that gender-based differences in

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[9] Hanne Darboven, *Words* (page ten), Spring 1972 issue of the New York-based *Avalanche* magazine, Photo © Stephan Hauser, Schaulager.

art production arise from a society built on the gender binary and the oppressive and discriminatory value system associated with it, inevitably leading to distinct experiences for female and male artists, which in turn impacts on their work.

And yet, Lippard's observation regarding Darboven's and Kozlov's work raises a valid point that complicates my considerations but also introduces a productive angle. Lippard is certainly right to say that Darboven's work eludes the "mark" of gender and thereby points to a rather consequential contradiction between Darboven's self-constitution within her writing as a "woman, writing" and the simultaneous resistance of her writing pieces to being identified as "woman's work." A closer look at the project Darboven originally intended for *c. 7,500* exemplifies this convincingly [7–9].

The piece – most likely an excerpt from a larger work – was printed under the title *Hanne Darboven Words*, without providing any contextualization. It consists of ten typewritten pages that showcase written-out numerals divided into five sections. The first section covers ranges of written numerals from 1 to 44, 1 to 45, 1 to 46, up to 1 to 52; the second starts with 1 to 44 and concludes with 1 to 53; the third begins with writing out 1 to 45 and finishes with 1 to 54; the fourth starts with 1 to 46 and ends with 1 to 55; while the fifth and final section opens with 1 to 45 and ends abruptly afterward mid-counting. This sudden cut irritates and creates the impression of a quasi-contingent selection. Furthermore, based solely on this excerpt, one cannot grasp the underlying logic of the piece or its "idea," thus leaving us also in the dark about how the work might continue. Moreover, as a typewritten document, it removes the personal "touch" and its accompanying sensuous quality, adding to the work's overall austerity and prompting the reader to concentrate on the "idea." However, since it is nearly impossible to identify the idea from the given fragment, the reader is left solely with the typewritten numerals, presumably a glimpse into a larger work that remains inaccessible.²²

Similarly, what lies beyond reach is the artist-subject, as marks of subjectivity, let alone gender, are eliminated.²³ Gender is not discernible in the work as there are no gender markers on the formal or stylistic level to indicate a woman's presence behind the typewriter, nor does the "content" address gender. Solely the ascription of the work to Hanne Darboven, i.e., the work's authorship, reveals that we are dealing with a "woman's work." Lippard is thus correct in suggesting a connection between the strong systematization and the gender neutrality presented in Darboven's work. Also, in the example discussed here, the typewriter contributes greatly to eliminating the subjective

and, thereby, gender codes.²⁴ By leaving the receiver alone with their own set of expectations, the work employs opacity or strategies of withdrawal, drawing attention to the categories and the accompanying value system that underpins every act of reception and, more importantly, to their limits. What remains is a strong sense of frustration.

While the elimination of subjectivity resonates with the (male-centered) artistic strategy prevalent in Conceptual art at that time (Wark 2001), the neutrality in Darboven's work cannot be regarded as a mere adoption of that norm. On the contrary, it appears to be a consciously employed critical operation that rests on a contradiction: Darboven explicitly constitutes herself within the act of writing as a woman who writes, while her writing bluntly disregards any subjective component and any classification as "woman's work." Whereas we are encouraged to regard Darboven's writing as a "woman's work," the writing itself concurrently undermines this interpretation by strongly emphasizing its self-referentiality. Thus, it rejects not only the classification as "woman's work" but also any categorization beyond that of *typewritten numerals arranged according to an unspecified pattern*.

However, one could argue that Darboven's practice might invoke the already heavily feminized administrative labor in the 1970s. Consequently, gender would already be somehow embedded in Darboven's practices of e.g. computing, typewriting, and filing, and thus in clerical work largely performed by women in the 1970s (as it is today). Hence, the contradiction would ultimately prove to be no contradiction since gender would be addressed at the level of clerical practices and their classification as women's work within the 1970s field of work. And yet, unlike artists such as Adrian Piper, Rosemary Castoro, or Howardena Pindell – who, in addition to working as clerks to support themselves, explicitly draw on their experiences as "pink-collar workers" and incorporate instruments, materials, and techniques associated with clerical work in their artistic practices (Lovatt 2022) – Darboven is not particularly interested in making this form of gendered labor visible in her practice. In fact, Brigid Doherty (1999) convincingly argues that Darboven's focus lies elsewhere. Although specifically addressing clerical work by confronting a life-size, armless mannequin – a stenographer – with the achievements of Marie Curie, Rosa Luxemburg, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf in *Quartett 88* (1988),²⁵ Darboven identifies with these remarkable women who have impacted their fields, rather than with the women entering the workforce as clerks at the turn of the twentieth century. This is further supported by Darboven explicitly stating that she developed the foundational principle of her mathematical

prose (“1 ist 1 ist 1” and “eins ist eins ist eins”) in response to Gertrude Stein’s famous line “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.”²⁶

Without denying the reality of the workforce and the strong feminization of clerical work and its materials in the 1970s (at least in North America and Western Europe) – Darboven herself began in the 1970s collaborating with a professional typist who executed her typewritten works –²⁷ I’d like to explore a different possibility. This presents itself when we approach the contradictions and conflicts in Darboven’s writing at face value. This will enable us to consider them as critical operations with significant epistemological and political implications.

Un/Writing “Woman” and its Epistemological Implications

Darboven’s writing creates a tension that might be the crux here, precisely because it establishes qua writing “hanne” as “a woman, writing” while concomitantly refusing to sustain it. Its very position between writing and unwriting “woman” qualifies it as a form of deconstruction, supported by Darboven’s incessant (non-representational) writing. Is it within this dynamic that writing “woman” initiates its unwriting as writing into illegibility, that is, beyond recognition.²⁸ To push it even further, writing “woman” introduces its unwriting and institutes (the possibility of) an otherwise writing. By doing so, Darboven resonates with, or perhaps implements, what Judith Butler (2004) has stipulated about gender as both the “mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized” as well as “the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (42). Thus, gender itself can act as the very possibility of its deconstruction and denaturalization. This carries considerable epistemological implications since it points to the unreliability of categories and norms, which are fundamental in providing (or, perhaps better, constituting) knowledge about the world. As evidenced by the work that Darboven originally had in mind for Lippard’s show, these tensions created within writing significantly impact the reception too, frustrating labels (such as woman’s work) and expectations, thereby shedding light on the limits and instability of categories (art, woman, man) and the accompanying value system that guide the act of reception.

The significance and reach of the discussed paradoxes in Darboven’s writing come sharper into relief when we consider Teresa de Lauretis’ argument that art itself is a technology of gender, which means that, among other technologies, art too is involved in *constructing* gender. While de Lauretis has focused her analysis of the representation of gender as its construction more specifically on

cinema, the author makes the following more general yet powerful statement: “in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction” (de Lauretis 1987, 3). This poignant assessment of Western Art and “high culture” renders significant Darboven’s own positionality when initiating these conflicts and contradictions within her writing in the 1970s. Situated at the intersection of feminist initiatives and Conceptual art, and therefore opposed to or, at the margins of the mainstream art world, still largely operating within the framework of a traditional, and indeed male-centered notion of art, Darboven’s self-representation as a “woman, writing” appears inevitably in sharp contrast to the (predominantly male) representations and constructions of gender prevalent throughout the artistic production in the West. This positionality exposes (Western and high) art as a technology of gender and gender ideology. What is more – and this is crucial in my view – Darboven’s writing does not present a counter representation of what a woman “is” within her writing, therefore refusing to engage in the representation/construction of gender.²⁹ Her indifference towards “putting the record straight” initiates a rupture that remains palpable. To echo what Judith Butler expressed in a slightly different context, which underlines the significance of such interventions even more: “disrupting what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality is intervening in the name of transformation” (Butler, J. 2004, 27). Following Butler, if social transformation starts with a rupture in the realm of established knowledge (which also defines what we perceive as reality), then Darboven’s act of writing “woman” into illegibility qualifies as her own (feminist) political project aimed at challenging categories and norms that create and validate this knowledge. Against this background, writing is indeed a very productive mode of fighting.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the 1970s writing practice of German Conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) as an intervention in established knowledge, conducted from a woman’s perspective. This new angle on Darboven’s writing arises from the artist’s statement “i am a woman, writing, hanne” and her largely overlooked encounters with the burgeoning feminist initiatives in art during the 1970s, and calls for a reevaluation of her writing-based oeuvre. Drawing from Darboven’s statement “i am a woman, writing, hanne” in a 1973 letter to feminist curator Lucy Lippard, I examine how Darboven’s writing introduces contradictions and conflicts as impactful critical operations. Darboven’s approach – writing “woman” into illegibility – serves as a form of deconstruction that exposes the instability of gender and thus of categories that organize (or, better yet, produce) our knowledge about the world. This qualifies Darboven’s writing practice as a sophisticated, yet subtle political project developed in response to both 1970s feminist initiatives and the patriarchal art world.

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NOTES

- 1 This letter also initiated another article that examines the gendering of tautologies in Darboven's writings from 1972 to 1978. The reflections in this essay expand on those ideas (see Stoica 2025).
- 2 "I guess the end of March or the beginning of April." This question most likely relates to Darboven's show at Leo Castelli in April 1973. Lippard's review of that show appeared in the October issue of *Artforum* that same year (see Lippard 1973).
- 3 Lippard referred to her pursuit as "internally subversive activism." (Lippard 2012, 74).
- 4 The so-called numbers shows are exhibitions organized by Lucy Lippard between 1969 and 1973, which include *557,087* (Seattle Art Museum Pavilion, September 5 – October 5, 1969), *955,000* (Vancouver Art Gallery, January 13 – February 8, 1970), and *2,972,453* (Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires, December 4–23, 1970). *c. 7,500* is the fourth and final numbers show. The names of the shows reference the local population of the locations where they were launched. (See e.g., Butler, C. 2012).
- 5 Correspondence in Lippard's records supports this assumption: In November 1972, Lippard began sending out invitations to artists for her show (see Lucy Lippard Papers, box 43). This coincides with the date of Darboven's first letter to Lippard regarding gender.
- 6 After CalArts, *c. 7,500* toured to The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (19 June – 31 July 1973), Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (September 21 – October 9, 1973), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (November 16 – December 16, 1973), The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts (December 23, 1973 – January 14, 1974), Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts (January 17 – February 10, 1974), 48 Earlham Street, Covent Garden, London (April 8–26, 1974), A.I.R. Gallery, New York (June 1–15, 1974), And/Or Gallery, Seattle (September 19 – October 6, 1974), Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York (October 16 – November 14, 1974).
- 7 These exhibitions are: *c. 7,500* (1973/74), *Frauen machen Kunst* (1976), *What is feminist art?* (1977), *Speaking Volumes: Women artist books* (1980), *Typisch Frau* (1981), *Le Choix des femmes* (1991), and *Serialität: Reihen und Netze* (1999). Elke Bippus, the curator of the latter mentioned in an email to the author that Darboven herself selected the work *Webstuhlarbeit. Am Burgberg / meiner Mutter / meiner Kindheit / postum a higher / knitting Penelope* for the show. Incidentally, this work was created in response to Thwaites' 1972 misogynistic review of Darboven's work: "In a world of computer art and electronic art-objects she might well have a place. Otherwise – it is the danger she must face – her work could degenerate into a kind of Higher Knitting, with the female quality of patience, detail – and not much else. A pioneer of a Penelope of the 20th century?" (Thwaites 1972, 25).
- 8 For instance, in her letter to Isi Fiszman from March 20, 1974: "this work/life and this – call it 'it' is not to buy in any way" (see Darboven 1974).
- 9 The first collection of letters, published in 1994, contains correspondence Darboven sent to her family in Hamburg during her stay in New York from 1966 to 1968, a significant period in her artistic career development (see Darboven 1997). The second collection entails Darboven's correspondence with her family and professional network, from 1967 to 1975. It was published posthumously in 2015 (see Darboven 2015).
- 10 A similar letter can be found in Lucy Lippard Papers at the Archives of American Art. Consequently, Lippard regarded these pages as a form of correspondence, unlike LeWitt. (see Lucy Lippard Papers, Box 6).
- 11 Remarkably, the German word "jedermann" used by Darboven in 1975 in her address of *Schreibzeit* is itself embedded in and reflects the male-centered society of the 1970s since it uses the generic masculine to refer to everyone, implying that the man is the prototypical human being. The word is composed of "jeder" (the masculine form for "every") and "Mann" (man). Darboven reacts on this composite by entangling the two components. Whether this

- qualifies as a critical gesture at the level of the signifier remains up for debate. I thank Tobias Ertl for this interesting observation. Even though the feminist linguistics in Germany was slowly emerging as an academic field at this time, it wasn't until 1980 that first guidelines against sexist language use were proposed (Trömel-Plötz 2008). I thank Sarah Wiesendanger for bringing the feminist linguistics of the 1970s to my attention.
- 12 Interestingly, this letter also reveals that Darboven sent a similar response to Carl Andre at the beginning of 1972, which the artist now echoes in her letter to Lippard.
 - 13 In addition to the two letters discussed here, Darboven included this statement in similar wording in *Schreibzeit* (see Fn 14) as well as in her work presented in the exhibition "What is feminist art? (1977). The artist repeated this statement for John Anthony Thwaites' *ARTnews* piece in 1978. (see Thwaites 1978).
 - 14 The passage in *Schreibzeit* was dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir. It reads: "i don't fight for being a woman – / – because i am a woman / a human being; / i do fight for being a human being – / – because i am a woman; / i do fight for men / human beings / men; / because i am a woman / a human being – / – i don't fight for being a woman – etc." (204).
 - 15 Whereas I have interpreted somewhere else these tautologies in Darboven's work as an instrument of questioning the gender binary (Stoica 2025), here I am more interested in how the artist shapes her standpoint in contrast to these tautologies revolving around 'art,' 'man,' and 'woman.' Tautologies caught in the repetition enclosed in circularity remain somewhat ambiguous about whether they present the gender binary as an unalterable state of affairs by invoking a supposedly 'natural' order, or boast their artificiality by suggesting that their significance derives from a society fundamentally structured around the gender binary. In contrast to the first reading, in which tautologies operate as a naturalization of the gender binary, the second one points to the possibility of acting against it. Tautologies then either invoke something like common knowledge to legitimize the status quo, or, alternatively, they interrupt it and allow for transformation.
 - 16 Lippard's correspondence from the time she was organizing c. 7,500 stands testimony to the lack of support. Also, in *Framing Feminism*, Roszika Parker mentions that c. 7,500 was met with a significant lack of support in the UK as well, relying heavily on the work of volunteers (Parker 1987, 194–196).
 - 17 According to Cornelia Butler, Darboven's *One Century in One Year* (1971), and Lee Lozano's *Dialogue Piece* (1969) played a crucial role in this respect (see Butler, C. 2012, 68).
 - 18 Lippard was working on the show when *Six Years* was sent to press. (See Morris, 2012, 21).
 - 19 Neither the exhibition shots nor the exhibition catalog or other documents in Lucy Lippard Papers at the Archives of American Art offer any clues aside from indicating that the work in question was a book carrying the title 1969 00 → 00. However, no book with this title is listed in the catalog of Darboven's books (Bippus and Westheider 2002), nor does this work appear in the database of Hanne Darboven Foundation, as I was confirmed in an email from the Estate.
 - 20 This caused the work to arrive too late for the show's opening in Valencia and was therefore only included in the subsequent iterations of the exhibition. All this can be read in a letter Lippard sent to Suzanne Kuffler on May 28, 1973. (Lucy Lippard Papers Box 43, Folder 16, Archives of American Art.).
 - 21 This statement frequently appears in Lippard's introductions to all-women shows or other essays from that period. These pieces are collected in Lippard's 1976 volume, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (see Lippard 1976).
 - 22 This fragment is similar to the work *Arbeit I*, which was exhibited at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in 1971. However, the key difference is that in the latter, the counting is done in German (See exh. cat. Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1971).
 - 23 Still, as Isabelle Graw argues, certain types of "residual expression" can be identified in Conceptual art, for instance in an artist's preference for working with numbers (Graw 2006).

- 24 Regarding her overall writing practice, Bippus' concept of "de-representation" may prove instrumental for a broader analysis of this aspect in Darboven's practice (Bippus 2015).
- 25 The fact that the stenographer is armless, hence unable to perform her clerical duties, contributes to the precariousness of her situation.
- 26 Darboven presents this fundamental principle in her work *Ein Jahrhundert 1970 – 1971 (A century 1970 – 1971)*.
- 27 This work might have also been produced by a typist. If that is the case, one must consider the implications for this argument, as it would sharpen the conflict discussed here.
- 28 In this regard, it is noteworthy that Darboven considered her writing as a continuation of James Joyce's, whom she admired for pushing traditional literature into unreadability (Bippus and Westheider 2002). The same applies to Gertrude Stein, who was equally important to Darboven and is renowned for her 'unreadable' works (see e.g. Cecire 2015).
- 29 Since de Lauretis emphasizes that every deconstruction of gender is inevitably a construction of gender (de Lauretis 1987), it is still up for debate whether this refusal could actually be seen as a circumvention of this dynamic. What is certain is that it confuses or obstructs the recognizability of gender categories, thereby destabilizing them.