

I am Still Alive: The Search for On Kawara

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1. Introduction

The majority of On Kawara's work is so austere that it has an almost anonymous presence, and yet it is utterly distinct and recognizable. He paints dates inside of boxes and accompanies them with a sheet of that day's newspaper, sends post cards with a few terse indicators of what he did on that particular date, and distributes seemingly generic, photocopied maps of where he went on various occasions. It is not difficult, then, to understand why Kawara's efforts initiate discussions in regard to time and space. However, as one continues to sift through the newspaper headlines, telegrams, maps, and post cards that span the decades of his career, one begins to develop a picture that has less to do with the artifacts themselves than with the fragments of humanity they illuminate. I argue that Kawara's work represents a shift wherein art is no longer a question of making or production, but of Being. Ultimately, his work beckons us to come closer even as it cannot help but withdraw from our grasp.

2. Messages and Maps

In one of his most well known series of works, Kawara employs telegrams as a means of expressing the message, "I am still alive." There are no graphics, no alterations, and no signature to distinguish them from any other telegrams. Each sends a message that an artist is alive, or that he is going to sleep, or some other simple sentence while presuming some interest on the part of a recipient. No reply is requested, and indeed it would be difficult to know where, much less how, to respond to such statements. While these missives have since been collected, exhibited, and catalogued, they are scarcely exemplary of traditional art objects. Rather, it is the added factor of human communication that makes them so intriguing.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the telegrams, some knowledge of On Kawara's personal history is beneficial. His earliest work was figurative in nature and filled with an understandable anxiety of life in post-Hiroshima Japan. In his homeland, he achieved notoriety for these youthful works, but for Kawara it was an uncomfortable fame. He recoiled from the spotlight, and chose to depart from both Japan and his traditional style. He traveled first to Mexico, then New York, and eventually to just about everywhere else in numerous and frequent trips around the globe. Crossing time zones, learning languages, and living an altogether new life, Kawara began moving away from art as pictorial representation and towards a very austere, almost impersonal production style. Words and dates became not only key elements of his pieces, they very often comprised the entire work itself. A triptych might bear nothing more than a word or two or possibly a date, while a "location" painting indicated nothing more than degrees of latitude and longitude. Such artifacts evoked persons and place, but only in the most

abstract of ways. What were these messages meant to tell us? And who was sending them?

Early in his career Kawara began addressing the philosophical questions raised by Jean-Paul Sartre and other Existentialists. Primarily concerned with shattering the totalizing norms and universals of previous thinkers, Kawara seemed drawn to the existential concepts of freedom and responsibility. Existential freedom is liberating in that persons are declared free to make their own choices and determine the courses of their own lives, emancipated from any pre-determined essence or obligation. Yet at the same time, the burden brought about by the ultimate responsibility that this freedom places upon the individual's shoulders can be staggering. Thus the act of living, or Being itself, must be authentic if it is to be meaningful, and to be authentic it must be lived in a state of straightforward awareness.

It is Sartre, in his monumental work *Being and Nothingness*, who breaks ontology in two: as Being, typified by what is there and Nothingness, pertaining to absence, lack, or what is not. Taken alone, a person is a being-in-itself, or simply something that exists on its own, as well as a being-for-itself, meaning it is both self-conscious and conscious of other things in the world. Nothingness, then, is the experience of a deficiency or subtraction from Being. It is the notion that something which *should* be there is somehow missing or hidden. According to Sartre, it has a sense of place and time, but is not defined by it. For him, there may possibly be no greater experience of nothingness than that which is recognized as the absence of other persons:

Absence, is not a nothingness of connections with a place; on the contrary, I determine Pierre in relation to a determined place by declaring that he is absent from it... On the other hand, I shall be able to lament his absence from a picnic which "took place" in a part of the country where he has never been. Pierre's absence is defined in relation to a place where he might himself determine himself to be, but this place itself is delimited as a place, not by the site not even by the solitary relations of the location to Pierre himself, but by the presence of other human-realities. It is in relation to other people that Pierre is absent (278).

It is in our relations with other people, our being-for-others, that the Existentialist finds many of her freedoms challenged. When one person is confronted by another, she becomes an object that is subject to the scrutiny of the other's gaze. This can be a disconcerting experience, and there is the moment of anxiety when one wonders if others see you as you see yourself, while secretly suspecting that the answer to that question is not as positive as we might always like it to be (Sartre, 260-261).

A sense of this uneasiness can be found in Kawara's work. For example, in a series of pieces entitled "I Went" Kawara maps out his various journeys by tracing his daily path along a map. In doing so he captures the nature of the trip as he understands it internally, as a linear series of forward moving straight-aways and turns. At the same time, he presents it in a manner so that others might view it externally, as seen from above and in its entirety. Kawara puts his life into his art, then advances the work while

simultaneously receding into the background. Many of his pieces have these intertwined characteristics of being and nothingness. He indicates a specific time and/or place, and yet reduces them to only their sparsest traces and most stripped down forms. He provides maps, but does not seem to want to be found.

Kawara also appears to be greatly concerned with what constitutes freedom in a world of objects and the circumstances that continuously place demands upon the person. His frequent use of mundane materials, such as newspapers that would normally be discarded shortly after being read, indicates a desire to evade the pitfalls of viewing art as something permanent and enduring. Quite the contrary, in matters of art, Kawara not only challenges the traditional norms of time but also of value, particularly in regard to the strange bedfellows these two sometimes make. Remarkably on the peculiar way that Kawara has managed to solve this dilemma within his work Hitoshi Kanazawa states that:

Normally, time changes the value of object—not only paintings—often bringing them added value. The very quality of a painting changes in proportion to the quality of time that has passed since its production, as is evident from a reflection on the value of any supposedly “great” painting. However, because On Kawara treats time as a regulated, “series” the value of the Date Painting, which was produced twenty-five years ago, is the same as that of more recent paintings. In other words, the Today Series, as indicated by its name, must be seen collectively as one project from its first piece (Date Painting) to its (long-awaited) last, and there is not much sense in examining differences between the works (13).

In his books of “One Million Years” Kawara listed, chronologically, a million years into the past and a million years into the future. It not only brings into question the significance of a single lifetime, it also demonstrates the relative inconsequentiality of even a thousand years or more. In this light, if great art is supposed to be timeless, it seems as though the museums are filled not with centuries but mere moments.

Kawara challenges such presuppositions and instead makes us wonder about our lives as well as the life of the artist. “I am not going to commit suicide don't worry” a telegram reassures us. Later, an image of a particular date, rendered in simple white typography on a monochrome background, provides another clue that he is still out there; or, at least he was, at one time, as were we. Someday these dates will stop.

As his work matures, Kawara goes beyond his initial existential concerns and moves further into an emerging ontology of what he terms “pure consciousness.” As an artist, Kawara remains as elusive as his work: rarely seen, purposefully isolated, and always on the move. Yet I will argue that even as he maintains his distance, Kawara’s dematerialized messages are intimations of a need for interconnectivity with others.

3. Gifts and the Absent Giver

One possible analysis of Kawara’s works that has been raised by critics is that it is purely uni-directional, as though he were doing nothing more than expressing his own solipsistic

ego. By reminding us that he is still alive, Kawara is clearly concerned with his own consciousness, but does not provide any subsequent indication that he is concerned about anyone else. Metaphorically speaking, his “I am fine” is never followed by asking, “And how are you?” Nor does he provide the public with much of a dialogue. Much is often lost in the interview process and thus he prefers not to give them, but Jonathan Watkins has been able to glean a bit of insight into Kawara through conversation:

For Kawara, any interrogation of the nature of artistic activity epitomized his ongoing preoccupation with the nature of consciousness.

Kawara does not believe that authentic communication is possible. Any notion of the simple transmission and reception of messages between individuals is undermined by the over-reliance of language on an overrated logic (60).

Hence, we are left with the odd paradox that someone who claims language is inherently faulty and that real communication is impossible, apparently devotes his life to creating language-based art expressed chiefly through telegrams, books, newspapers, and other common means of communication (Watkins, 61). Yet if Kawara were only trying to transmit his own ego irrespective a receiver, would he still choose to work in the manner that he does? It seems as though there is something greater at work here; an undercurrent beneath the surface that pulls the outward flow backwards and ultimately does instigate an authentic connection between the artist and his viewers. I believe that not only is this desire for a connection intentional on Kawara’s part, but that he is also equally deliberate in its avoidance of making such a connection overt and obvious. Herein lies one of his works’ most subtle yet distinguishing characteristics. Furthermore, perhaps one way to understand Kawara’s work is by not looking at it strictly as art, but also as gift.

Ben Kinmont, who once curated a show of Kawara’s, found in his work a positive force that countered the traditional definitions of Conceptual Art as a only dematerialization of the art object. Rather, he found an additional element that was:

...about a materialization of life, with different modes of practice divisible into types of exchange and value. On Kawara’s postcards and telegrams were presented as a form of gift economy. Little did I know that one of the exhibition’s most lasting effects for me would be a friendship with On that is as generous as his work (26).

Indeed, when someone sends a post card or a telegram, it is in one sense a gift to another person. Granted, post cards may be massed produced and sent in bundles by the thousand, but Kawara never did that. In fact, he never sent more than two per day and only to carefully chosen recipients whom he knew personally. His gifts were small, in fact so very small and almost generic with their typed or rubberstamped messages, that they could scarcely be recognized as either art or a gift. And this may be an integral part of their aesthetic objective, part of which is tangible and the rest hidden by the gap in time and space between sender and receiver. Viewed in this sense, the impossibility of authentic communication is similar to the way in which Jacques Derrida informs us of the impossibility of the gift as:

...the gift that is not a present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unpresentable, and as a consequence, secret. The event of the gift would link the essence without essence of the gift to secrecy. For one might say that a gift that could be recognized as such in the light of day, a gift destined for recognition, would immediately annul itself (29).

That is, a gift, once it is handed over as a present, ceases to become a gift in that instantly an obligation is incurred by its recipient, if only in the form of a polite thank you or acknowledgment. It becomes a commodity in an interpersonal exchange. Thus, it begs the question as to how a gift, by definition as that which is imparted without compensation, can ever truly be an authentic gift. It is seemingly impossible, and yet there still remains a certain unquantifiable aspect to the gift itself.

In Kawara's post cards there is a desire for a connection with other human beings, but there is also a tremendous amount of suspicion for the unreliability of communicative methods for conveying meaning. The work longs to reach out to others, but fears the face-to-face encounter. Therefore, it must arrive and announce itself and yet retain some of its secrecy.

These transitory facets may be less apparent in his date paintings and other works, but they are there all the same. Particularly when the date paintings are mounted beside the front pages of newspapers, they exhibit a unified work that is both personal and impersonal in its construction. The dates are hand painted and thus more traditionally "artistic" by virtue of being rendered by human exertion. The newspapers are mass-produced through the mechanization of assembly line printing. However, the date paintings are austere and lacking in emotional content while the newspapers humanize the events of the day with their unrestrained headlines. Both are material, but with an immaterial aesthetic extension. The two elements are thus both representations and beyond representation, and they could fit together as if they were a single box.

Time and again, Kawara's presence waxes and wanes within his exhibitions. He avoids attending his own openings and provides no biographical information for the catalogue other than the number of days he has been alive. He is not simply absent, he is *noticeably* absent. Yet his work remains decidedly social, and at times even political, in that they are specifically aimed at conveying messages to other humans in what are always turbulent and unpredictable times. Kawara appears to be reaching out to other people, even as he hides in the shadows. According to Nena Dimitrijevic:

The ultimate message of On Kawara's date paintings, which are accompanied with clippings from the artist's diary, seems to be that public figures come and leave the stage of politics and life; some wars end and others begin; and all that remains from this universal history of dishonor is subjectively and casually chosen road signs, which sometimes pass for history (19).

Kawara comes and goes as everyone comes and goes, although we all share in this life, and what some might call a mutual history, together. Those who know him well say that

he is fascinated by and mildly obsessed with playing games such as cards, monopoly, chess, and go. All of these games require at least one partner and are not solitary pursuits. Kawara can never stay in total isolation. He makes his move and then sits back, waiting for the other players to make theirs.

The later work of the 1990s began focussing on his desire to illuminate and understand a Pure Consciousness. These installations were not radically different from much of his earlier work in their construction, but the artist had continued to alter his mode of presentation. Kawara created installations of date paintings that he hung inside of kindergarten classrooms. He then photographed the children learning and playing in front and around them, utterly unconcerned with the so-called “high art” within their midst and virtually oblivious to the presence of the photographer. Childhood, it seems, represents a time before self-consciousness and prior to the burdens of existential responsibility. Kawara portrays childhood as a pure sense of Being, suggesting that the ways in which each of the children acts, alone and with each other, are not concerned with anything other than being what they are at that singular moment in time. Once again, as Jean-Luc Nancy has claimed, Kawara tries to provide us with a glimpse of what can never be seen in its entirety:

On Kawara gathers the time of men, measurers of time. A million years back, a million years ahead. Between the two, the space where we are: we here now, as much as and as everyone, at every present moment and in every place. But everyone, also, in the present of he who makes the work, and who withdraws from it as he opens it, who withdraws from it as he exposes it (3).

The dates that hang on the walls behind the children remind us that they are still in time, but that they have yet to sense the limitations of finitude. Kawara is a person with over 26,000 days to his credit, and one might speculate that reflection upon this escalating number could very well be a contributing factor to his search for Pure Consciousness. At age five, the Pure Consciousness photographs reminds us, everything is still possible.

4. Conclusion

On Kawara’s work takes the viewer on a journey through space and time that calls into question each of them and more. Although there is an element of production in all of his pieces, the sheer repetitiveness of his creations attest that the real focus of his work lies elsewhere. From his early days of contemplating existentialist problems to his later and more recent quest to shed light on a Pure Consciousness, much of Kawara’s work deals directly with questions of Being. Perhaps authentic communication is impossible, but nonetheless he keeps on sending. With each communiqué, something is given and something is held back. We know he is out there somewhere, and the continued arrival of his messages displays a need, not for independence, but for human interconnectivity. The work comes in various forms and mediums and yet each, in its own singular way, still informs us that we, the viewers and receivers, are still alive.

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