

THE SOUND OF ON KAWARA'S SILENCE

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum - New York

By Keren Moscovitch

To stroll along the Guggenheim's iconic spiral during "On Kawara—Silence" is to take a mind-spinning journey through time, history and the obsessive mind of the prolific Japanese artist. The museum's gyral architecture echoes a cyclonic sense of time into which visitors are swept as they embark on a cyclical journey through the last half-century. Amidst a sweeping presentation that spans decades of Kawara's work, a moving portrait emerges of an artist who compulsively documents every aspect of his own existence, situating his practice in a grey zone between fevered obsession and devoted meditation. Throughout its unwinding, the exhibition unfolds as a lyrical homage to a life dedicated to creative rigor and spiritual consciousness.

Most art aficionados are familiar with Kawara's date paintings, the *Today* series, an impressive set of canvases spanning 40 years during which the artist produced thousands of paintings of dates on solid backgrounds in a variety of typographic styles and punctuation methods that pay homage to the stylistic conventions of the location in which each piece was produced, and employing the ritualized methodology that defines the whole of his oeuvre. Few, however, have experienced the works beyond their formal minimalist aesthetic to see them contextualized within the historical chronology that informs them. For this exhibition, thoughtfully choreographed by Curator Jeffrey Weiss and Assistant Curator Anne Wheeler in close consultation with the artist, the paintings are displayed alongside the boxes in which they have been stored, each lined with a newspaper clipping from that day. Drifting through the exhibit and viewing the works in a different order each time highlights the infinite narratives and combinations offered by history and its ability to be continuously re-written.

Kawara's work functions like a pinch to one's side, a demand to confirm consciousness, a reminder to himself that he persists, that he is indeed still here, that he survived the night to once again open his eyes. In the series *I Got Up* Kawara sends a postcard every day to one of a select group of people in his life, stating the exact time he got up that day and the address he inhabited. They are displayed between two panes of glass, allowing viewers to see all the fronts of the cards at once, or all the backs of the cards at once, but not the front and back of a single card at the same time. This formal decision results in a temporal and geographic dislocation that mimics the nomadic life of Kawara himself, as he struggles to ground his migrations within a constant stream of self-generated data. Repetition abounds, as multiple postcards of icons like the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower form geometric blocks of redundancy. Periodic breaks in practice do not reveal their origin, and feel like they could be momentary lapses in hope, or perhaps respites from the need to affirm one's existence.

Alongside *I Got Up* is displayed the related *I Went* series, a set of maps upon which the artist traced his daily movements through the city in which he was situated, and the *I Met* series, consisting



On Kawara, *JUN 10 1975, From I Got Up, 1968–79*, stamped ink on postcard, 3 1/2" x 5 1/2". Collection of Keiji and Sawako Usami. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

of stacks of typed papers displaying a list of names of people he encountered that day. Seeing the same name repeated at the top of most pages—his wife Hiroko Hiraoka's—offers a touching level of intimacy that is rarely revealed so directly in Kawara's work, the punctum of humanity at the core of his exhaustive archive.

The series *I Am Still Alive* points to the gravity of the matter. A grouping of telegrams to his friends, sent periodically over many decades, assures them that indeed he is still alive and has not committed suicide. There is a somber tone to these pieces that puts a new spin on Kawara's other work, the emotional and existential content becoming clear once one sees through the lens of a man waking up every morning and choosing to remain a part of this world.

On Kawara no longer persists in physical form. Having passed away in 2014, he no longer assures friends that his eyes have opened that morning, that he did not spend the day alone, that his feet touched the earth, that he witnessed another day on earth. But the sound of his footsteps, the scratching of his pen and the turning of pages lingers in memoriam and celebration, a poetic system of coded language that brings time to life. ■

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