



ON KAWARA

On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the Hills

Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth,
New Zealand
www.govettb.org.nz
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IN HONOURED MEMORY OF HUGH CORBAN HARRIS, AGED 25 YEARS, WHO WAS MURDERED BY THE REBEL MAORIS AT WAITARA ON THE 28TH JULY 1860

The above text is transcribed from a number of such inscriptions on the gravestones in the cemetery of a dark-stoned nineteenth century church a short walk from the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand,

where a major, world-travelling retrospective paused—*On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the Hills*, curated by Jonathan Watkins, Director of the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Marking as it does a death in a bitter conflict, that stone-cut text might remind us that a date is not necessarily neutral, a mere marker in a system for indifferently apportioning time. In its very passion and partiality, it suggests that for a given individual or group, a given date may be indelibly memorable. Take January 4th, 1966: it might be the day you were caught with the heroin that put you away, the day your right breast was removed, the day you married one of the great beauties and heiresses of the age.

For *On Kawara*, January 4th, 1966, recalls none of these things. It is the date of his first *Date Painting*, the first of over two thousand works painted so far in the *Today Series*, each of

which records the date it was painted, in white sans serif capitals and numbers on a black, blue or red monochrome background. Here, the date has been lifted from its conventional place at the base and to one side of the canvas, to the centre: the picture becomes all date. This series, under way now for some thirty-nine years, will end only with the artist's death—which it thus persistently brings into consciousness and anticipates.

Each *Date Painting* is the assertion of a continued existence, a counter against the annihilation of self; but it is also a gravestone, awaiting only the carving of that final inscription, the death-date, for the series in which it finds itself to be complete and for its own place in the full array to become clear. We might be reminded of Samuel Beckett's Molloy when he tells us, "Sometimes I went and looked at my grave. The stone was up already". In fact, *On Kawara's* systems are very much like the obsessive systems invented by Beckett's characters in their hopeless attempts to control the uncontrollable. Beckett and *On Kawara* share a manic mensuration and hairsplitting logic; both of them mad, implacable, funny.

An *On Kawara* work on paper, *100 Years Calendar [18,864 Days]* [1984], obligingly points out, by means of a system of variously coloured dots, all the days on which *Date Paintings* were done. We may learn from this helpful instrument that on some days and for some clumps of days, no *Date Painting* was made, so that what we get and will get until the last is done, is a distinct temporality of oblivions and returns from oblivion. Of course, when the last does come, this rhythm of presence and absence will come to an end, and the oblivion will be final. No reason is given for the non-painting days, though we are told that if a painting is not complete by midnight of the day it records, it is mercilessly put down.

A curatorial problem arises: with so large a number of *Date Paintings* available, and each so like the last and the next, how to choose the relatively small number it is possible to show in a single exhibition? Watkins' solution—a most elegant and amusing solution and one worthy of the artist himself—is to choose only from those works painted on Sundays, a full list of which is supplied by the catalogue. Also, though this is not mentioned, no paintings with coloured grounds are chosen, but only those

with a base of black or occasionally, those of a near-black, blue-black. Or is what seems a curatorial darkening of the palette mere chance, resulting from the fact that the majority of the *Date Paintings* have always been black?

With a nice nonchalance—a sort of breezy pugnacity—the catalogue’s foreword announces, “No artist’s statement here, as ever, no portrait of the artist and no interview. Furthermore, there are no newspaper cuttings to provide a commentary of current affairs for *Date Paintings* and no colourful postcards.” A veritable corpus of refusals! Never mind that the artist himself used to include a newspaper clipping in each of the boxes, in which he sends the *Date Paintings* into the world, thus himself contaminating their purities with history [apparently, he doesn’t do this any more]. Never mind either, that in *I Got Up*, On Kawara’s series of postcards to colleagues and friends announcing the time of his getting up—‘I got up at 11.10 A.M.’, ‘I got up at 1.17 P.M.’, ‘I got up at 12.48 P.M.’—the postcards bearing his message are pungently colourful. Not to mention the stamps on their reverse, providing as they do a supplementary studding with colour, and an additional iconography.

In this exhibition and its catalogue, there will be no City Halls, Houses of Parliament, shopping streets, travel lodges, bridges, city skylines, oil derricks, working harbours, sports stadia or cowboys and gauchos, all with skies of travelogue blue. I cull this little list of postcards’ subjects from the cards on the cover of Watkins’ much less stern publication, *On Kawara* [2002]. Perhaps having published the cards once, even granting them the privilege of a cover, he just didn’t feel like doing it again. Whatever the reason, Watkins certainly sought something more severe for the present occasion.

The dismissal of colour I have noted in the exhibition occurs in its catalogue too. Although in Phaidon’s *On Kawara* publication there are red, blue and black ground *Date Paintings*, with the catalogue *On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the Hills*, we get black alone, or near black. Not that one repines. In both exhibition and catalogue those blacks look wonderfully elegant together: if this is austerity, it is a most sumptuous austerity. The catalogue’s Foreword might also have announced in its litany of negatives: ‘no art history and no art criticism’, since its essays are neither on the artist nor on his art. Rather, they are concerned with such weightier matters as ‘What Future Does Man Have?’ and ‘A Philosophical Study of Cosmic Consciousness’. The tone is portentous, the voice pseudo-biblical.



It is as if the essays of a Mondrian catalogue had been written by Mondrian’s Theosophist friends. From what art does On Kawara’s art emerge? What art does his art refuse? Who are his true peers? [Billy Apple leaps to mind]. What structures recur? And how does this art pose—or refuse to pose—an originating artist-figure? Such questions, it seems, are of no interest. The New Zealand poet Allen Curnow once insisted that, “the signature of a region, like that of a witness written below the poet’s, can attest value in the work.” It was an invention of the fifteenth century Italians—and especially the Venetians—to sign paintings with the name of one’s city, next to one’s signature proper. On one occasion, while visiting Venice, Albrecht Dürer even signed with the name of his country [in Latin, the Esperanto of his day]: ALBERTUS DÜRER GERMANICUS.

On Kawara does not sign his paintings, at least in the narrow or literal sense. Yet you could certainly say he has a signature style: that he signs in this sense. For repetition too is a form of signing an oeuvre as oeuvre—and the *Date Paintings* and the telegrams are nothing if not repetitious. Repetition leads to recognisability—another form of signing—and On Kawara is surely a particularly recognisable artist. Also, in the very broadest sense, there is a signing with place in the *Date Paintings*, since the manner of marking a date—either month first, followed by the day or vice versa, the various forms of word contraction and the particular language used, each give at least some indication of the place of painting. So, for instance, if the text is in Spanish, the work is made in Spain, or in some Spanish speaking country. For non-Western scripts, such as Japanese, On Kawara uses Esperanto: faced with an Esperanto date we might hazard an origin in Japan or Russia.

With the telegram works of course, the second major group in this show, we get not only a signing and a dating, but also the addresses of both sender and recipient, and the names of both. In other words, we get signatures of place, the bald beginnings of biography and the skeletal indications at once of a chronology and a social network. Here, despite the repetitiousness of the message—‘I AM STILL ALIVE’—variety is provided by differing readings [for instance: I am still alive, despite all; I am still alive, just; I am still alive, alas], by the differing graphics and colours of the telegram forms of the various countries and by the varying names and addresses of the recipients—not to mention the constantly changing address of the sender himself. Incidentally, we learn from the latter how well-travelled is this most private and anti-autobiographical of artists, who never attends his own openings and who refuses to give interviews, or to provide for catalogues a portrait of the artist, and the conventionally careerist apparatus of an exhibition list—though he is more than happy to type out the years between the date of his birth and the date of the exhibition opening.

Despite the concatenation of austerities announced in its Foreword, the catalogue grants us a well designed and generously illustrated book, offering such pleasures as sixty-eight beautiful black and white plates of the making of a single *Date Painting*. There too the artist is absent. However, his presence is everywhere implied, since in each of these scenes of making it seems he has only just left. We also get sixty-eight plates of the ten volumes entitled *One Million Years [Past]*, 1969—the third major group of objects in the show—in which the numerals of every single year of a million years are typed out in full, with the dedication, “For all those who have lived and died”; and fifty-one plates of the telegram works; and finally, seven plates of the *Pure Consciousness* exhibitions, consisting of

Date Paintings mounted in various kindergartens throughout the world. [Here is a standard form of primitivism, in which the child is preferred to the adult, much as the savage is preferred to the civilised.]

Neither in the catalogue, nor in the exhibition do we find the ten typed volumes of *One Million Years [Future]* [1980], with its wonderfully poetic dedication: ‘For the last one’—that is, for the last human being alive. But of course we can’t have everything, and we do get this work’s counterpart, *One Million Years [Past]*.

From the photographs of making, mentioned above, we learn that On Kawara, uses no masking tapes, templates or stencils. Nor letaset. Nor photographic silkscreen, nor computer graphics. He sticks to what is intrinsically the most primitivist of the arts, painting by hand—a mode that begins before history begins, with the very origins of humankind. The idea that to paint is a primitivist act, since painting is a form that survives from prehistoric times, was first enunciated in some marvellous passages of the French art historian Henri Focillon. Painting, he felt, “keeps alive man’s dim past, something without which we could not exist... Thus, a potent yesterday perpetually renews itself”. [It is perhaps relevant here that a visit On Kawara made in the early 1960s to the prehistoric cave paintings of Altamira profoundly moved him, granting him a kind of epiphany from which his mature work emerged].

On Kawara paints, but he is not painterly. His art has no truck with the expressionist fallacy, according to which each brushstroke is the untrammelled expression of a powerfully moved soul. Focillon can help us here too. He asserts, of the hand-made aspect of painting that, “the imprint of this manual process is profoundly marked, even when it covers its own tracks” and “the artist’s hand makes itself felt even in the effort it makes to be docile, in its very circumspection and modesty.” How well this fits a painter, who everywhere uses the hand to hide the hand, who everywhere effaces himself, covering his tracks as if not wanting to be found.

Despite On Kawara’s ‘most moderated and uniform execution’, his touch is there in the finished work as a trace; not flagrant, certainly, but able to be sensed. Caught in the ‘infinitely plastic and fluid texture of painting,’ discovered perhaps in spite of itself, it enlivens even the surface of even of these infinitely exact looking works. For, despite a manner of painting, in which by a kind of scrupulous self-abnegation, the hand is used to conceal the hand, once the hand is used, the artist will be present, ‘as if inadvertently’. Painting, it seems, is necessarily an issue of the carnal body, and the ‘handless eye’ does not exist. On Kawara is present throughout, if only as a looming absence.