

# On Kawara

American, b. Japan, 1932

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5 paintings, 1 drawing, 1 book

For On Kawara, life, work, and the inevitable passage of time are inextricably bound. Kawara has described himself as a "tourist"<sup>1</sup> but might more accurately be considered an expatriated cosmopolitan who feels at home in the world, wherever he happens to be, without a preference for a particular culture or language. He left his native Japan in 1959, traveling to Mexico (where he lived for four years), then on to New York, Paris, and Toledo, Spain, with a side trip north to see the Altamira cave paintings, to which he had a profound response. Upon his return to New York via Paris in 1964, Kawara's exposure to the current art-world trends of Pop and Conceptualism led him to break with his previous figurative style in favor of an increasingly idea-based practice.

On January 4, 1966, Kawara covered a small canvas with a deep blue acrylic and hand-painted the date in white across its midsection. This work inaugurated his *TODAY* series (also commonly referred to as "date paintings"), a cycle of works with a formally austere and strict conceptual regimen that has continued for almost forty years. Each is created on the date indicated and in the language of the country in which it was completed. They come in a variety of sizes and a limited palette of colors (black, gray, blue, red), and take eight to nine hours—a full day's work—to complete. On some days, he paints more than one; other days he doesn't paint at all. If he doesn't finish by the end of the day, the painting is destroyed. Upon completion, each is placed in a handmade cardboard box lined with a page from that day's newspaper.<sup>2</sup> After completing a work, Kawara records (in the language of the country he was in on the first day of the year) the pertinent details (date, size, color samples) in a loose-leaf journal that also includes a monthly calendar marking off the days on which he works.<sup>3</sup>

Kawara considers the disciplined and repetitive nature of his artistic activity as "brainwork" comparable to "meditation."<sup>4</sup> This mindfulness is captured in perpetuity in the date paintings: what is documented is a day in a life.<sup>5</sup> However, the calendar marks time for the artist and viewer alike—his paintings bring about an awareness of our own moments, both squandered and well spent. With the addition of the newspaper fragments, the consequences associated with the descent of sand through the hourglass of a single life are interwoven within the larger fabric of human endeavor, ultimately providing a social and political subtext for the work. By using language to focus attention on temporality and geography, Kawara successfully maps layovers along the itinerary of life, and in so doing, captures both time and space.

## E.C.

## Notes

1. Jonathan Watkins, "Survey: Where 'I Don't Know' Is the Right Answer," in *On Kawara* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 54.
2. The date paintings in the Walker's collection were created January 16 to 20, 1989, in Stuttgart, Germany. Each box has a newspaper clipping attached to the bottom. Those dated January 16 to 19 have pages from the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, while January 20 has a page from the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*. The headlines range in content from a train accident in Bangladesh (January 16) to a student demonstration (January 19) to the disarmament of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union (January 20). Although an integral part of the work, the boxes are seldom exhibited alongside the paintings, per the artist's wishes.
3. The artist also included subtitles for each of his paintings in his journals. Occasionally they were composed of personal notes such as "I didn't sleep well last night," but more often they were determined by a headline selected from the enclosed newspaper clipping. He abandoned this practice on December 28, 1972, in Stockholm; his last one read, "I don't know." Thereafter, the subtitles were simply notations of the day of the week. See Watkins, "Where 'I Don't Know' Is the Right Answer," 42.
4. Kawara quoted in Lucy Lippard, "Just in Time: On Kawara," in On Kawara and Lucy R. Lippard, eds., *On Kawara Today 1967*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Otis Art Institute Gallery, 1977), unpaginated.
5. Not interested in the celebrity that sometimes accompanies art-world success, Kawara does not engage in interviews, nor does he allow his photograph to be published. This conspicuous absence makes his "presence" in the work even more poignant.



On Kawara Selection from *TODAY* series 1989 acrylic on canvas, paperboard box, newspaper 10 1/8 x 105 x 1 7/8 in. (26.7 x 266.7 x 4.8 cm) overall installed T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1991 1991.90

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Joan Rothfuss and Elizabeth Carpenter

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