

“The only picture of human life which may be called poetic is that in which those motives which have meaning for the abstract intelligence alone give way to the purely human impulses which govern the heart.” - Richard Wagner, *The Music of the Future* (1860)<sup>1</sup>

“For all those who have lived and died” - On Kawara, *One Million Years* (1999)<sup>2</sup>

The work of the Conceptual artists is commonly regarded by casual viewers as excessively rational, almost lifeless in its logic and exacting rigor. Since it took shape in the 1960s as an international idiom for artmaking, it has frustrated and bewildered audiences, even those people who consider themselves sympathetic to the irreverence of “avant-gardism,” or those simply invested in the art of the future. The art of On Kawara was and remains no less uncompromising in its commitment to a purity of concept and form, relentlessly focused as it was on the carefully crafted terms of its making. The artist’s series of *I Am Still Alive* telegrams, one practice amongst a host of other equally austere modes Kawara used to examine apparently trivial aspects of daily life (the time, the date, a path walked, a person met), seem to depart from the usual coarseness of his methodology; in their plainspoken honesty, and in their candid acknowledgment of mortality.

Materially, they are delicate and small, printed with black ink on standard-issue paper. Their form is mostly regular and consistent. Each of the telegrams Kawara sent to Dr. Zdenek Felix are a rectangle approximately 5 ½ inches by 8, bordered with the logo of the telegram company that processed it. They each bear a message: *I am still alive*. The sentence is terse, straightforward. It conveys in the simplest terms a basic confirmation of life, using a technology that is by its nature ephemeral and unprecious. They were almost exclusively sent as readymade responses to art-world inquiries, devised by Kawara as a way to limit involvement and keep distance from the demands of his growing career as an artist. Each telegram is machine-made, unsophisticated in craft, and quiet in tone: *I am still alive*. Kawara died over a decade ago, after 29,771 days on Earth. That phrase, alternately glib and solemn, poignant and blunt, resounds like a chorus when one is in a room full of them. What was once a concrete fact utilized toward the strictest of ends, today reads as a missive from the next world— a confirmation of a life, now ended.

Kawara began the *I Am Still Alive* series in 1969 and continued until the telegram’s increasing obsolescence made it too difficult to maintain. The first three telegrams intended to be artworks that Kawara ever sent were to the curator Michel Claura in 1969, as part of the artist’s contribution to an exhibition titled *18 Paris IV.70*. The first of them read: “I am not going to commit suicide, don’t worry.” The second read: “I am not going to commit suicide, worry.” The third read: “I am going to sleep forget it.” Knowing little about the conditions surrounding Kawara’s participation in Claura’s exhibition, one is left to wonder. What distress prompted that message? What conflict arose? What pain was he in? Throughout his life Kawara was known to be a deeply private person, nearly ascetic in his lifestyle and habits. Few photographs have been taken of him, and the details of his biography are scant. His personal life was as calculatedly obscured as the strictures that governed his work. Yet within the germ of this artist’s exceptional series is a sentiment belying all of the boldfaced austerity of his conceptualism. By acknowledging the reality that one *might not still be living* in the short time a message takes to reach its recipient, or in the few months it takes to build an exhibition— in short, acknowledging that death is just as common and likely as life— the telegrams smuggle into Kawara’s notoriously cold formalism an uncharacteristic poetry, a unique *gravitas*. They embody the strange fact of existence; its brevity, its abundance, its incalculable beauty.

- Bennett Smith

---

<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire, Charles. “Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London/New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2008), 122-23.

<sup>2</sup> Kawara, On. *One Million Years (Past)* (Brussels: Micheline Szwajcer and Michèle Didier, 1999).