ARTFORUM

Touring New York's Artist-Run Spaces

By Theo Belci

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IT WAS SATURDAY AFTERNOON, and I was waiting at home for an address via Instagram DM. Turquoise—an apartment gallery run from a spare room in Bed-Stuy—was holding an opening for a two-part exhibition of On Kawara's series "I Am Still Alive," ca. 1969–2000, in collaboration with Jonathan A. Hill Bookseller's Yoshi Hill and Cooper Campbell, an artist. The works solely comprise telegrams bearing the titular phrase, which Kawara sent in the hundreds to curators, museum directors, and art-world nomenklatura worldwide. I'd never been to the gallery before, but as it turned out it was on my street, three blocks from my apartment.

Entering the space, I was greeted by Bennett Smith, the artist and curator who runs Turquoise. After a short chat, I wandered down the hall to find a small bedroom housing five such telegrams, sent to a Swiss curator between 1972 and 1992. Belying the candidness of the phrase "I Am Still Alive," these messages are deeply calculated missives that allowed the artist to manage his professional relationships at a level of removal that would normally be considered overtly dispassionate. For Kawara, living as an artist is shown to be iterative and communal—a process that occurs through assertion, by confirming things will go on as before to hold an audience's attention. In spite of its aloofness, the writing carries a feeling of vulnerability, asking the recipient to keep Kawara in mind, to maintain a connection, and not forget about his practice while it occurs out of sight. In the face of his own mortality, a famously private social life, and a rigid economy of means throughout his projects, Kawara seems to fight against fading away by insulating himself within a wide network of collaborators. Fittingly, the majority of the marks on the telegrams are addresses, dates, and receipts of their sending—the "I Am Still Alive" messages often struggle to stand out beside the evidence of their medium's transit. On my way out, Smith told me that this would be the last show held in this apartment space. Someone is moving into the spare room, and Turquoise has already begun the hunt for a permanent location. The second half of the Kawara show, housed in a temporary office in the Financial District, could represent the first step in courting greater outreach. It's a shame to lose something that I only just found out existed, but this seems to be the way of things in New York at the moment—climb to the next rung of the ladder or get kicked off it entirely.

Later in the week, I slunk down a crammed hallway into the opening of "Thieves Like Us" at Benny's Video, a project space in Bushwick run by artist Craig Jun Li. The sizable crowd and compact space were made larger by Campbell's Mylar work *Wall (28 Varick Ave)*, 2024–25, a hazy multipanel mirror affixed to the room's bumpy concrete back wall. As a DIY gesture it is equal parts elegant and charming, calling attention to the limitations of the space while simultaneously overcoming them, making the small room feel airy and open and amplifying the already numerous attendees into a veritable mob. Atop a table in the corner of the room was another standout work, Josh Minkus's *Organon*, 2025, a sculpture-diorama lovingly assembled from household items. Recalling both a cityscape and a junk-drawer assemblage, it registers with the careful attention of a utopian project. Unlike the grand designs of Robert Moses or other would-be reconstructors of modern cityscapes, the work carries a whimsy normally contradictory to visionary plans. In its delicacy, it appears as an earnest vision of the future by a crafty child, someone too exacting to be restricted by the draconian realism of *Sim City*. Between Turquoise and Benny's Video, I'm attracted to this small network of artists aiding in one another's projects, building out exhibitions that engage interdependence and correspondence in their artworks and organizational structures. One imagines *Organon* as a city built from such spaces, in which interpersonal exchange informs infrastructure, constructing superhighways and power grids to draw the like-minded closer

together. After talking through the work with Minkus, I was introduced to William Wiebe, another artist, who just organized a show at his gallery Emmelines, located in a subway station on Fifty-Third street, near the Museum of Modern Art. As a keepsake he offered a lighter branded with the space's logo, a benevolent gesture certain to work its way into more pockets than even the sleekest business card.

To reach Emmelines, visitors pass through an underground corridor of cobblers, barbers, and a Dunkin', finally arriving at a glass window showcasing Pierre Leguillon's *Pamphlet*, 2025, a set of three nearly century-old posters advertising beer, mustard, and a newspaper, arranged into a readymade triptych loosely resembling the New York City flag. It is a perfect marriage of artist and location, an airy niche for Leguillon's meticulously collected print advertisements in an otherwise cramped transept of the train system. The posters are paired with two more print readymades—fashion ads featuring headshots of artists Marina Abramović and Seth Price—and a Kasuri textile reinterpretation of a Mexican mural, cut from a larger roll and sold by the meter. The display is unpretentious and friendly—there is no catch, just the images in conversation. The works draw viewers in to compare techniques and methodologies in advertising without disrupting their original sources; one notices that the vintage advertisements were signed as artworks by their original creators, and the offset prints and lithographs possess flairs of charm and style that the couture-clad campaigns of Abramović and Price resolutely lack. If advertising operates by crystallizing the desires of its audience, Leguillon's display emphasizes the appeal of the banal, celebrating careful, laborious execution in the era of the unapologetically flashy artist-influencer (The shadows and highlights of the mustard globs in the eighty-year-old lithograph are more sumptuous than anything I've seen lately rendered in oil.)

In the downstairs space of Chinatown's Parent Company, the exhibition "Cessation" ties together many of the month's associates, displaying work from Wiebe and Campbell in a large group show curated by Li. Sixteen other artists including Joey Gonnella, Becca Albee, David Nelson, and Coco Klockner feature in this exhibition, which loosely focuses on photography and printed matter. My attention was immediately drawn toward Dave McKenzie's *Open Letters,* 2004, a pair of typed notes in which the artist apologizes to a driver for stepping out in front of his moving car, then reflects that he will most likely do it again. Like Kawara's telegrams, the letters play with sincerity in their address, stretching feigned vulnerability between two identical prints hanging across the gallery. Unlike his radiant mirror at Benny's Video, Campbell's untitled works here consist of three cardboard trays painted in increasingly dark colors, their rough material causing pronounced cracks and imperfections in the paint's surface, while Wiebe's pigment print *Fountain*, 2025, pictures a pink mist of imperceptible depth, temperature, and density. Most works in the show are similarly opaque, flat, and vague. Few contain figures, and those that do suggest absent or frustrated forms, as in Klockner's closely cropped and grainy faces in two works named *Untitled (grindr disaster mobile game ad)*. Reading the checklist, I saw that Albee's five (figureless) photos of tracks and marks on a sandy beach also share a title: *Felix dies rather young. So does Joe Orton. Consider the congested matrix we now know as history's machinery, and draw parallels and opposites as to how one is remembered, by whom, for whose benefit. How many voices are involved? With the artists no longer with us, who speaks for them? Do you always agree with posthumous posturing?* "Cessation's" focus runs counter to the shows at Turquoise, Benny's Video, and Emmelines, examining gaps, voids, and frustrations to better understand the aesthetics of disconnection.

Parent Company began in 2023 as a project space hosted in a shipping container in Downtown Brooklyn and now occupies the basement and first floors of a Manhattan storefront. It's very easy to see any of the other spaces mentioned making similar transitions in equally short time frames, if only due to the specific pressures of New York's uniquely commercialized and unforgiving market. If the myriad artist-run spaces that make up the substrate of New York's art scene continue up the ladder to permanent locations and stable programs, one hopes that proximity will engender interdependence. As in Minkus's utopian diorama, energy and attachment are built through exchange.