A Painting a Day
On Kawara's extraordinary project.

By Peter Schjeldahl

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On Kawara, the subject of a vast and elegant retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, was born in Japan and lived very, very quietly in Manhattan for fifty years until his death, last June, at the age of eighty-one—or, rather, the age of twenty-nine thousand seven hundred and seventy-one days, by the form of reckoning that he preferred. Starting in 1966, he created nearly three thousand acrylic paintings, which feature only the dates on which they were made: the month, day, and year meticulously inscribed in white on layered grounds of red, blue, or dark gray. The "Date Paintings" are all rendered in the same sans serif-style, without the aid of stencils, and are horizontally oriented. They come in eight sizes: the smallest measure eight by ten inches, the largest sixty-one by eighty-nine inches. If Kawara couldn't finish a day's painting by midnight, he destroyed it. It was hard work. He missed on many occasions, but managed a marathon stretch of three straight months in 1970.

A frequent traveller, Kawara adapted his orthography to that of the country in which he found himself: "16 FEV. 1969" in São Paulo, "30.DEZ.1991" in Vienna. He made a cardboard box for each painting and lined it with all or part of a page from that day's edition of a local newspaper, with no apparent attention to what had been reported on it. The pages may stir nostalgia or, as in the case of those accompanying paintings made during the seemingly endless Vietnam War, revive nightmares. Certain dates, of course, might excite some people more than others. One large painting, "May 1, 1987" (which is not in the show), sold at auction last year for more than four million dollars. It's essentially the same as the others. Was it somebody's birthday?

Kawara's just-the-facts mind-set wasn't limited to his paintings. While travelling, he sent more than fifteen hundred picture-postcards to acquaintances, with no message but a rubber stamp of the time that he had woken up that day. The fact that he kept irregular hours, rising early on some days and in midafternoon on others, is as close to a self-revelation as he ever provided. He also sent more than nine hundred telegrams to people he knew, telling them nothing more than "I am still alive." And he often kept a record of where he had gone on a given day, drawing his routes in red lines on maps, and wrote down the names of people he had met. Even more oddly, in 1970 and 1971 he typed out a list of the previous million years (from 1969 to 998,031 B.C.); in 1998 he did the same with the forthcoming million (1999 to 1,001,998 A.D.). On a stage on the Guggenheim's ground floor, volunteer readers recite these sequences for five hours a day.

The madly pertinacious show, curated by Jeffrey Weiss, with assistance from Anne Wheeler, presents a great many bound books and ring binders full of the artist's recorded data (far fewer examples might have been sufficiently informative). There are more than a thousand postcards mounted in standing Plexiglas panels, for double-sided viewing. Up and down the museum's ramp, we swim in an archival deluge. What does it all mean? Perhaps nothing. I think of a line by Wallace Stevens: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Or perhaps everything: all of a life, rolled flat. There's an over-all drollery, but what the joke may be, and whom it's on, defies comprehension. What would you be like if you had done what Kawara did?

Kawara was secretive about his personal life and his biography, the details of which are spotty. He was born in the small city of Kariya, the son of an engineer. Twelve years old at the time of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, he was left deeply unsettled by the war. In 1951, he graduated from high school and moved to Tokyo, where, with little or no formal training, he quickly became recognized on the city's thriving bohemian scene for paintings of a surreal and gloomy sort, some picturing dismembered bodies. (None of his early art is in the show; it begins with tentative drawings, made in 1964, which experiment with abstraction and ideas, never realized, for sculptural works.) In 1959, when he was twenty-six, he went to Mexico City to join his father, who had taken a job at a Toyota branch there. Kawara stayed for three years, attending art school, then,

after visiting New York and Paris, travelled widely in Europe.

In 1964, he settled in New York, with his wife, Hiroko Hiraoka, a Neo-Dadaist artist he had known in Japan. They had two children and lived frugally, in a series of spaces downtown, on funds from odd jobs, occasional sales of their work, and, according to Jeffrey Weiss, Kawara's winnings from gambling on games, chiefly mah-jongg. (His other pastimes included chess, Go, roulette, and fly-fishing in upstate New York.) In 1965, he began making paintings of words, phrases, and invented codes on monochrome canvases, but destroyed most of them after he lit upon the date motif. Two early pieces that survive—the last he made which refer to a place rather than a time—are a large set of three canvases lettered "one thing," "1965," and "viet-nam" and a single painting of latitude and longitude notations for some place in the Sahara Desert.

With his mature work, Kawara joined the newly formed international movement of conceptual art, which made games of separating art from its normal associations with visual imagining and emotional expression in favor of objectified thought. "The idea is a machine that makes the art," Sol LeWitt declared in "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969). Kawara was soon befriended and esteemed by fellow-paladins of the impersonal, including LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth, the creator of "One and Three Chairs" (1965)—a real chair grouped with a photograph of it and a reproduced dictionary definition of "chair." But Kawara maintained a public profile that was not only low—to the end of his life, he almost never consented to being interviewed or photographed—but invisible, apart from sporadic appearances at group shows. He had resolved to make "Date Paintings" for four years before displaying them in quantity, which he finally did at the Tokyo Biennial in 1970 and at his first solo show, the next year, with the prominent Konrad Fischer gallery, in Düsseldorf.

The conceptualists codified an iconoclastic notion that had taken form intermittently in modern art since Marcel Duchamp: roughly, that art is all in the head. Of course, the head contains a lot else, too, which Kawara made a mission of bringing to rigorous order. He did so with fidelity to the raw facts of living in the present tense. Widely read in philosophy, he had been particularly inspired by existentialism. It strikes me that Albert Camus's touchstone book-length essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) affords a snug interpretation of Kawara's rote procedures: repetitive actions—like the rolling uphill of a stone that promptly rolls back—that are always new while apparently pointless. The essay addresses the problem of suicide: Why not opt out of a futile existence? In 1969, before Kawara adopted the "I am still alive" formula, he sent three postcards, the first of which read, "I am not going to commit suicide dont worry." (The next two wittily rounded out the implied crisis: "I am not going to commit suicide worry" and "I am going to sleep forget it.") Kawara's subsequent career jibes with the concluding sentence of Camus's essay: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

How much you like the Guggenheim show will reflect your susceptibility to the charm of that thought. My own is limited. I like art works to be unique, and I want a sense that someone inhabits them. At the core of Kawara's multitudinous production, there's a wintry vacancy; the content is as uniform as death. But there is a term for the effect that it generates, obliterating relative judgments: the sublime. Kawara's art evokes a cosmic perspective, by which his own life and, by extension, the lives of us all register as a negligible spark in time. The pleasures afforded by his steady energy, superlative craft, and fastidious taste come and go, in flickers, within the pall of their monotony. Some art shows fill your spirit. This one empties you. You won't forget it.

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Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic. His latest book is "Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings, 1988-2018."

On Kawara, Telegram to Sol LeWitt, February 5 (1970)
Photo: Courtesy LeWitt Collection
On Kawara's "Today" paintings, installed at the Guggenheim
Photo: Ben Davis
On Kawara, JAN. 4, 1966 "New York's traffic strike." New York (1966)
Photo: Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London