

Teaching

On Kawara

ARTIST

On KAWARA

(on ka-wa-ra)

河原 温



On Kawara's studio, 13th Street, New York, 1966

BORN

1932, Kariya, Japan

DIED

2014, New York

THEMES

Identity
Materials and Process

ART MEDIUMS

Painting
Conceptual Art

“In a certain sense the phrase ‘I am still alive’ can never be sent as it cannot be received by the addressee instantaneously. . . . It is only valid at the very instant that it is being written, and in the very next second it no longer is a certainty. . . . Likewise, it is a sentence of self-reassurance. . . . ‘I am still alive.’ The activity of telling oneself and the world ‘I am still alive.’”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

On Kawara devoted his life to exploring ideas of place and time with art based on language and numbers. Most of his works are parts of series that catalogue his daily life and routines in existential and meditative ways. He is recognized as a pioneer of Conceptual art of the 1960s.

Born in Kariya, Japan, in 1932, Kawara was raised in an intellectual family and exposed to the country's modern, cosmopolitan culture. He was only thirteen years old when World War II ended with the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Living in Tokyo in the early 1950s, Kawara studied philosophy as well as political and psychoanalytic theory. Kawara settled in New York in 1964, where he developed several series of works devoid of imagery and instead featuring plain language and information systems.

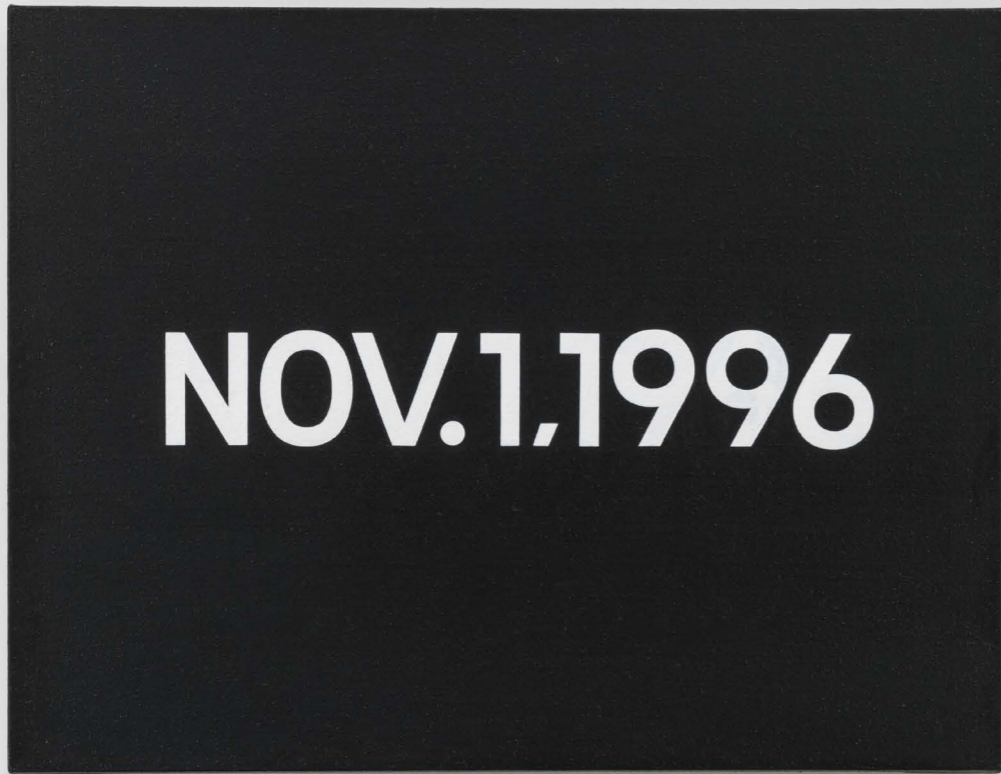
On January 4, 1966, he created the first of his Date Paintings—monochromatic canvases of red, blue, or gray upon which only the date is painted in white—which together constitute the *Today* series that he would continue to produce throughout his life. These works range between eight sizes, from eight by ten inches to sixty-one by eighty-nine inches. They were produced meticulously, according to a series of steps that never varied. If a painting was not finished by midnight, he destroyed it. Kawara fabricated a cardboard storage box for each Date Painting. Many boxes are lined with a cutting from a local newspaper, juxtaposing the deadpan sign of the date with the

hurly-burly of that day's events. Over the course of forty-eight years, Kawara produced several thousand of these paintings in more than one hundred thirty places around the world.

For the series *I Got Up* (1968–79), Kawara sent two postcards every day to friends, family members, collectors, and colleagues. On each card, he stamped the date, his name, his current address, the name and address of the recipient, and the phrase I GOT UP AT (always in English and capital letters) followed by the time he rose from bed. Tourist picture postcards were always used, and the text was aligned in a similar way each time. The mass production of postcards and mechanical stamps contrasts with the handmade nature of the work.

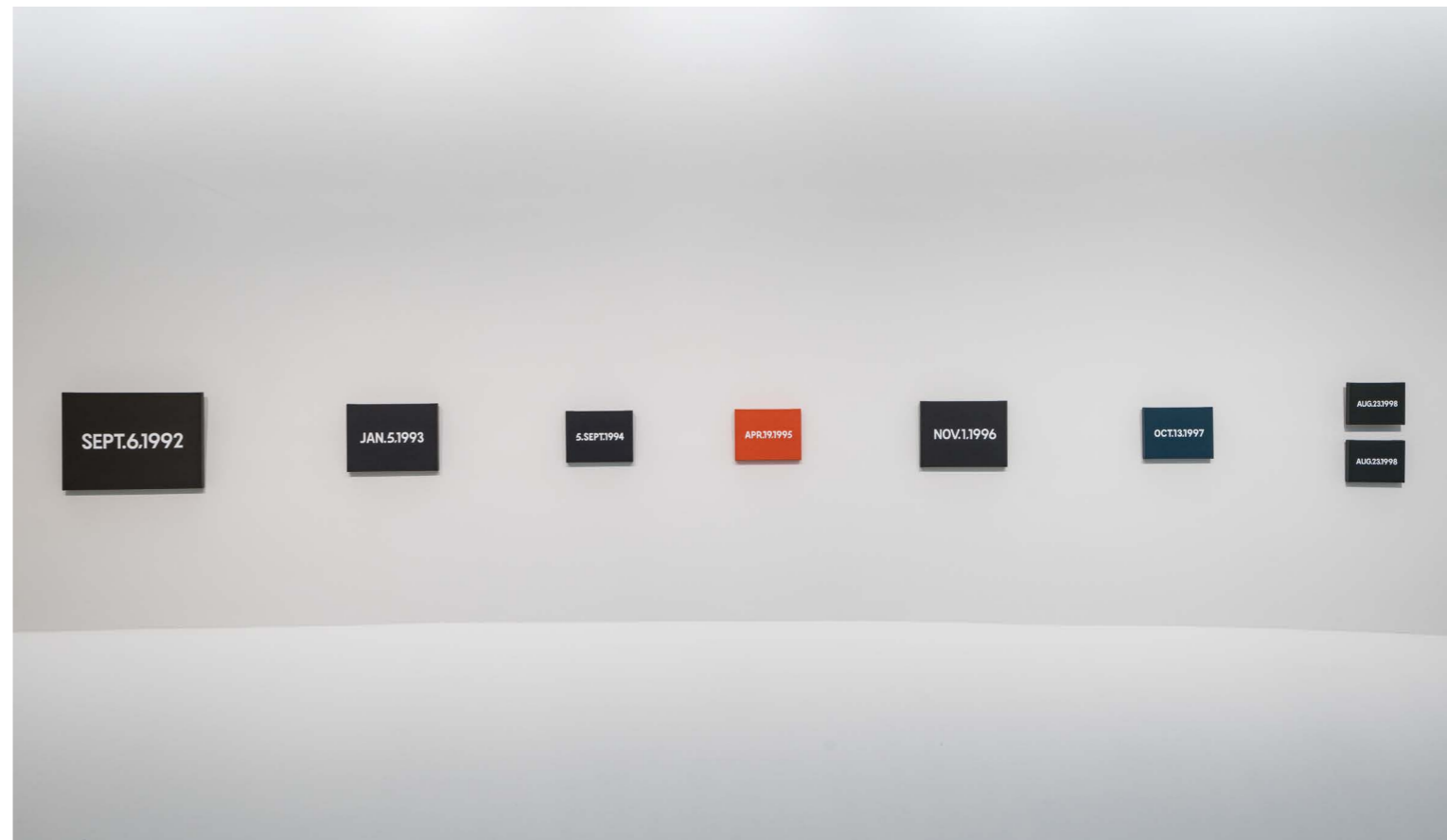
On Kawara died in the summer of 2014. His official biography consists solely of the sum total of days he had been alive. At his death, that number was 29,771.

¹ On Kawara, “1970 Telegram,” quoted in Greg Allen, “On Kawara Today,” *Greg.org* (blog), July 10, 2014, http://greg.org/archive/2014/07/10/on_kawara_today.html.



On Kawara, Nov. 1, 1996. From Today, 1966–2013. Acrylic on canvas and artist-made box, 33 x 43.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds through prior gift of Daimler-Benz in honor of Thomas M. Messer 2016.19

View and Discuss



Installation view, *On Kawara—Silence*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 6–May 3, 2015

← Look at the work *Nov. 1, 1996* (from *Today, 1966–2013*). This painting is part of the *Today* series, or *Date Paintings*.

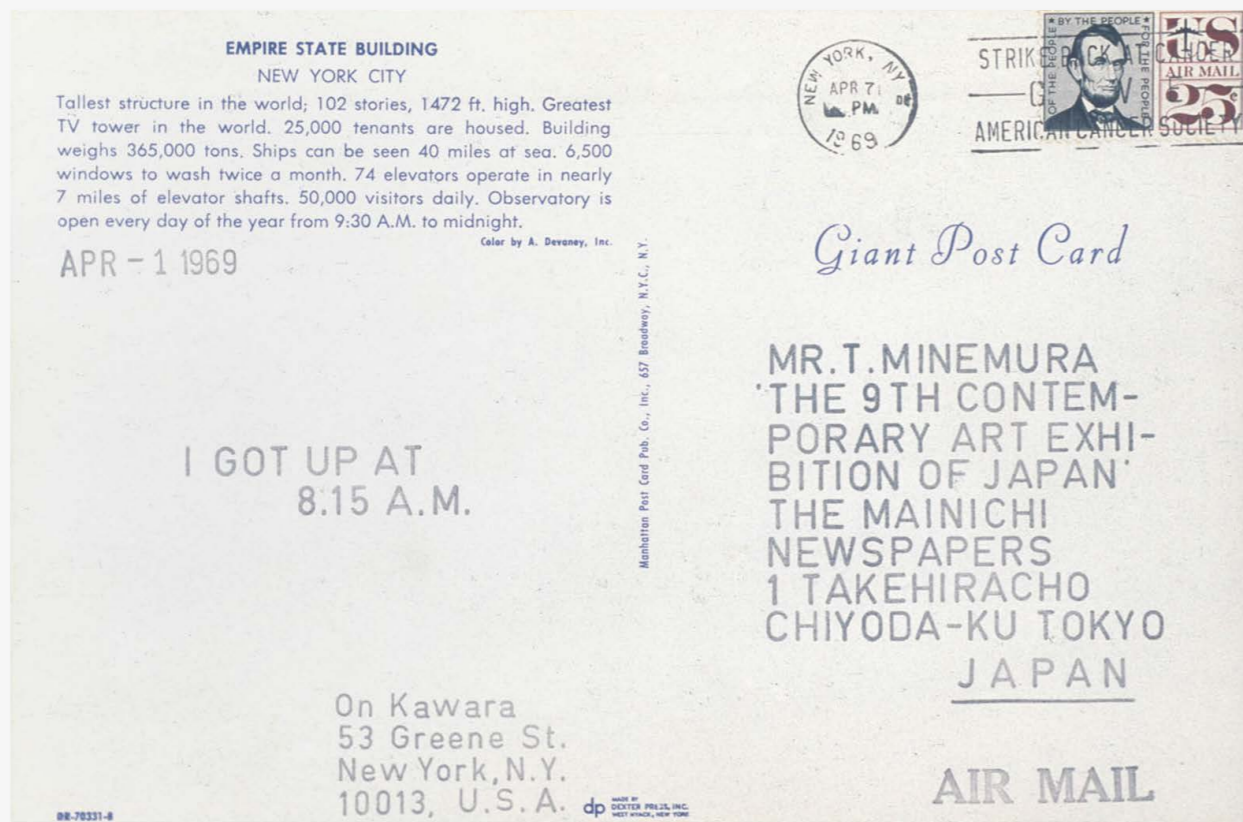
What do you notice about this work? What do you think the challenges would be in making a painting like this?

→ Watch the video “How On Kawara Made His Date Paintings” at guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-on-kawara-made-his-date-paintings.

What additional thoughts do you have about the piece after viewing the video?

→ Many Date Paintings are accompanied by a newspaper from that day. Look at the cutting in *Nov. 1, 1996*.

How does it shed light on this date in history? Which date would you choose to paint and why? What news story from that day would you choose to line the cardboard box?



On Kawara, *Postcards to Toshiaki Minemura*, April 1969 (details). From *I Got Up*, 1968–79. Stamped ink on thirty postcards, 15.2 × 23 cm each. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Toshiaki Minemura 2015.21

View and Discuss

→ Look at the work *Postcards to Toshiaki Minemura* (from *I Got Up*, 1978–79). Kawara sent postcards to friends or colleagues every day for nearly twelve years. He always followed the same format, down to the placement of the stamped text.

Do you do anything the same way every day? Why? How does it feel to keep up this routine? How would it feel to break the routine?



Installation view, *On Kawara—Silence*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 6–May 3, 2015

→ This work is part of the series *I Got Up*. What do you notice about it? Watch the video “On Kawara: Self-Observation” at [guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-self-observation](https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-self-observation).

What additional thoughts do you have about *I Got Up* after viewing the video?

Classroom Activities

Paint Precisely

Despite their mechanical appearance, Kawara's Date Paintings are meticulously handmade in multiple layers. Kawara's tools included tapered brushes, a ruler, a set square, an X-acto knife, and a brush for dusting. He rotated the canvas throughout the process in order to paint from all sides and thereby achieve exacting results.



Process of a Date Painting. On Kawara, *5. SEPT. 1994*, Düsseldorf. From *Today*, 1966–2013. Acrylic on canvas, 25.4 × 33 cm. Private collection

Try painting in a precise way. Produce a word, date, or another type of text on paper or canvas board with tools such as a pencil, tapered brushes, a ruler, and a set square. Reflect on the difficulties you faced while making such a precise painting.

Subtitle Your Day

Many of the Date Paintings have subtitles. Some of these record personal anecdotes, such as “I played ‘Monopoly’ with Joseph, Christine and Hiroko this afternoon. We ate a lot of spaghetti” (January 1, 1968). Others record current events, some of them momentous, such as the *Apollo 11* moon landing in 1969. Still other subtitles refer to the Date Paintings themselves; one reads, “I am afraid of my *Today* paintings” (May 29, 1966).

For this activity, record a subtitle every day for two weeks. They can be personal, historical, or even arbitrary. What is it like to capture a day with a subtitle?

Classroom Activities

Freedom within Constraints

Kawara often constrained his series with self-imposed protocols and systems. Many artists find rules and systems to be a source of creativity rather than limitation.

Have students research an artist who imposed rules or systems on his or her process and have them attempt to recreate these systems. Examples of artists include John Cage, Sol LeWitt, Piet Mondrian, and Ad Reinhardt. What did their systems help them produce? Why do you think they stuck with these systems? How did their systems reflect their philosophies about art?

Mail Art

Mail art is a radically democratic art form that emerged in the early 1960s and continues to the present day. It aims to strip away the value of fine art and make the everyday, ordinary acts of living and communication the substance and theme of art. While Kawara's work is not technically considered Mail art because he was not part of a group, it does share the purpose to make art a living practice of everyday life.

As a class, research approaches to Mail art and plan a school-wide exhibition that embraces some of the ideas behind the movement.

Resources

Websites

- David Zwirner. <https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/kawara>.
- Museum of Modern Art, *Analog Network: Mail Art 1960–1999*. <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/analognetwork/>.

Videos

- AV Festival. “On Kawara: *One Million Years*.” April 16, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baQr2SxMJz4>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “Everyday Meditation in *On Kawara—Silence* at the Guggenheim.” December 16, 2014. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/everyday-meditation-in-on-kawarasilence-at-the-guggenheim>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “On Kawara: Date Paintings.” February 6, 2015. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-date-paintings>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “On Kawara: Self-Observation.” February 6, 2015. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawara-self-observation>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “*On Kawara—Silence*.” February 13, 2015. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawarasilence>.

Articles

- Allen, Greg. “On Kawara Today.” *Greg.org* (blog), July 10, 2014. http://greg.org/archive/2014/07/10/on_kawara_today.html.
- Dover, Caitlin. “How On Kawara Made His Date Paintings.” *Checklist* (blog). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, March 9, 2015. <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-on-kawara-made-his-date-paintings>.

Books

- Weiss, Jeffrey with Anne Wheeler. *On Kawara—Silence*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2015.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist’s surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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