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Jeffrey Weiss, Daniel Buren, and Whitney Davis

### *On Kawara—Silence*

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### *On Kawara—Silence*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 6–May 3, 2015

Cesar Cornejo

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Installation view, *On Kawara—Silence*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 6–May 3, 2015 (photograph © David Heald; provided by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)

I first saw On Kawara's work in person in 1998 at the retrospective exhibition *Whole and Parts 1964–1995* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. At the time I was a graduate student in that city, and my memory of the show is marked by the architecture of the museum, with its rectangular spaces and high ceilings, where each of his bodies of work was assigned a separate space, objectivizing them and creating a sense of preciousness. Overall, the symmetric configuration of the spaces gave the impression that his work had arrived at a final destination, where it was placed for contemplation and veneration.

While encouraging a similar meditative effect, the spatial relationships in *On Kawara—Silence* at the Guggenheim Museum also functioned differently by allowing works from different series to be in dialogue with each other rather than maintaining them in isolation. Displays organized in tandem with the building's architecture configured time-based experiences, while also serving to reveal private aspects of the artist's process and shedding light on the Japanese traditions present in his work.

The exhibition gathered work produced over the artist's fifty-year-long career. Organized by senior curator Jeffrey Weiss with assistant curator Anne Wheeler, the exhibition had been planned in close dialogue with On Kawara and continued to further his vision after his untimely death in July 2014.

The Guggenheim Museum is among the most famous museums in the world and arguably the most iconic. Its design is particularly suitable to On Kawara's work. According to an interview published on the museum's website, exhibiting in this venue was of special interest to the artist due to its spatial characteristics and its associations with "the cyclical nature of time and the way the museum represents that" (Anne Wheeler commentary, in *On Kawara—Silence*, video, <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/on-kawarasilence>).

Through the exhibition, On Kawara's work and the museum's architecture blended to form a monumental and interactive representation of time, transforming the building itself into a work of art. Through this operation, the intrinsic time-based aspects of the museum's design were highlighted, and On Kawara's work became monumental by virtue of its intimate dialogue with the architecture.

The contrast between the open space of the museum and its spiral ramp and the more intimate spaces arranged on its perimeter helped to balance the perceptual experience of the exhibition. Therefore, a visitor could look across the ramp at the *Today* series of date paintings (1966–2013), experiencing a continuum in space, and yet stop in front of a work to contemplate it individually, for a fraction of a second, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to experience simultaneously the synchronic and diachronic aspects of On Kawara's work.

In addition to the spatial construction of time that the exhibition so clearly portrayed, there was another, more subtle aspect that gave access to On Kawara's process: an omnipresent *chinmoku* (silence). Embedded in this atmosphere, carefully crafted and detailed presentations and displays slowed the pace of the show, inviting visitors to engage at personal, introspective, and meditative levels.

One of these displays was composed of a group of boxes that On Kawara designed to store the paintings of his *Today* series, their interiors lined with newspapers published on the dates of the paintings that they were meant to store, so that they functioned both as containers and as time capsules. Through the act of reading those newspapers, the visitors learned what was happening on that particular date and could also ponder On Kawara's selection criteria for those articles and how they might have reflected his state of mind. While these boxes also suggested aspects reminiscent of the packing and wrapping traditions so deeply rooted in Japanese culture, this sparse, minimalist aesthetic contrasted with the most commonly known, cheapest, and content-loaded materials, newspapers.

Another original display comprised the transparent acrylic, vertical screens used to show postcards from the series *I Got Up* (1968–79), allowing people to look at them from both sides. Other parts of the exhibition were visible through the screens, as were other people looking at artworks, transforming the personal experience into a collective one. This particular way of displaying the works also recalled a Japanese tradition. In Japan sending “Nengajos” (New Year’s postcards) to family, friends, and colleagues is an important yearly custom. A sign of respect, the greeting includes a congratulatory message and a request to continue receiving the support from that person in the year to come. The postcards should arrive to their destinations precisely on January 1, and the postal service has a set deadline that senders should meet in order to achieve that. Looking through them is one of the main activities at every Japanese household on the first day of the year. The postcards display at the Guggenheim created the conditions to, unconsciously, reenact the ritual of carefully reviewing the Nengajos, as is done in Japan every January 1.

A constant element in On Kawara’s work, revealed by the display of different series in conversation with each other, is that the artist was, as he remarked, predominantly a collector. Whether of people, places, or moments, he was constantly recording things that we normally consider irrelevant, although through his vision he transformed all that material into transcendental evidence of time as the vessel that we all experience and take for granted. He took his pursuit to such lengths that it is hard to imagine how he was able to accomplish it. Here we also find parallels with a Japanese custom of exchanging *meishis* (business cards). During the exchange, a brief ritual takes place in which each party demonstrates mutual respect toward the other. This may happen hundreds or thousands of times along the life of an individual. It could be said that the cards become a peculiar collection of names, of people whom the collection’s owner may in many cases never meet again. On Kawara’s systematic collection of the names of people he met, articles he read, dates, and more, is imbued with the same spirit, and in the exhibition, it resonated through all his bodies of work.

Also interesting was the display of drawings that he made early in his career, some of which were projects for sculptures and installations. The expression in them is primarily minimal, marked by the presence of geometric structures. While different from the rest of the works in the exhibition, these drawings already show some of the characteristics that On Kawara’s work would later fully develop. The dominance of large areas of nearly empty space where color is applied economically, marking rhythms, may be interpreted as representations of time in space. These works also portray On Kawara’s spatial thinking, which the exhibition brought to its fullest expression.

Finally, looking at the overwhelming amount of work, produced steadily over a fifty-year period, viewers cannot help but be impressed by On Kawara’s discipline. When each of the series is displayed separately, they might be perceived as separate from each other not only in the exhibition space, but also in the process of their making. The interplay that took place among them at the Guggenheim, a consequence of the way that they were displayed, invited viewers to perceive the work and On Kawara’s working process not as linear—producing one body of work and then moving on to the next—but rather as a dialectic in which several bodies of work overlapped and evolved in parallel, affecting each other. Bringing this line of thought further, we can attempt to reconstruct a typical day in On Kawara’s life. We can imagine him getting up in the morning, stamping and sending a postcard to his gallery in Berlin, later having breakfast while reading the newspaper or watching the news on TV, then going to his studio to start a *Today* painting. After a few hours, he may have left the studio to go to a meeting where he met a few people, whose names he diligently took note of, and then went for lunch and to read a book, events that he also recorded in his diary, and from there he went back to the studio to resume work on the painting that he had started in the morning. After some time working on the painting, he might have read some more news or watched more TV and finished the painting. Then he may have sat at the typewriter to type a list of the names of the people whom he met that day, or the books or articles that he read, and probably by the end of the day he had stamped a postcard from the series *I am still alive* and put it on a desk to mail the next morning to his gallery in Tokyo. The synchronicity spatially portrayed by the exhibition of works at *On Kawara—Silence* made it possible to conciliate all these parts into a single, meditative process embedded in his life, and to see his art as an extension of it.

Cesar Cornejo

Associate Professor, Sculpture and Extended Media, School of Art and Art History, University of South Florida



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