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On Kawara, Jan. 19, 1982, 1982. Liquitex acrylic on canvas (with its handmade cardboard box and newspaper insert), 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ARCHIVES Contemporary Art.

On Kawara: 1933 – 2014

by Noah Dillon

Comedian Louis CK points out, with his characteristic pragmatism, “A lot of people wonder what happens after you die. Lots of things happen after you die — just none of them include you.” The recent death of On Kawara ends the brief but significant line of a life and of an exceptionally powerful artistic contribution. Human life is a rarer accomplishment than most of us, living day-to-day, sometimes remember. Most of the world is uninhabitable. Probably far greater than 99% of the entire Universe is completely inhospitable to life. Figuring out how to organize the mind and the body into some kind of harmonious, eudaimonic state is an ongoing struggle. Just getting up each day can feel like a victory. And, after any life extends for its short span, it ends. Thereafter everything else continues in its absence. That someone lives and is known at all, is momentous.

Kawara was 81 years old. Born in Japan in the midst of the 20th Century’s great upheavals, he moved to New York in 1965 where he remained until his death last week. Early in his career he showed figurative paintings, but moved toward conceptual art by the early 1960s. He exhibited his work regularly at Paula Cooper in New York, Yvon Lambert in Paris, and other galleries from the late 1960s onward and was included in

one of the first large surveys of conceptual art, "Information," at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. There's a permanent installation of his work at Dia:Beacon and a large retrospective to be exhibited at the Guggenheim early next year. His New York gallery, David Zwirner, announced his death on Thursday.

Kawara had a group of friends and colleagues, but he was known for being retiring. He emerged alongside conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, a close friend. Kawara shared their interest in language and its ability to frame or shape human perception, to describe and to conceal. Only bits and pieces of his life are available, recounted by those who knew him and as documented in works such as his postcards and telegrams. It is likely that he was influenced by American and Japanese fluxus artists who helped develop and formalize (if that's the right word) mail art in the 1950s and '60s. Correspondence evinces his familiarity with John Baldessari, John Evans, Sol LeWitt, Michael Sestier, numerous curators and dealers in Minimalist and conceptual art of his era, and collectors. But such connections connote only a very hazy portrait of Kawara.

In his best-known series, *Today*, he documented every day of his life from January 4, 1966 (two days after his 33rd birthday) until, perhaps, very recently. This project highlights the impossibility of notating one's life adequately. Even as recording technology has improved and expanded the personal and professional archives of those living in the developed world, when a person dies that's essentially it. Kawara never published any statements about his work, didn't grant interviews, never gave speeches, never sat on public panel discussions, wasn't photographed. And yet with the *Today* series he recorded his existence by making one painting for every day, consisting solely of a complete date, rendered in white on a monochromatic background. It's a simple act that gets straight to the heart of a lot of complicated stuff about our existence, experience and finitude. The sum of his archive is paltry in comparison to any person's life, to Kawara's life indeed, with a minimum of context provided for each date: a newspaper clipping stored with the painting and a record in a

diaristic calendar. But it's a rich testimony. It was as fleetingly temporal as anything, though it remains.

A parallel to the *Today* series, Kawara's *One Million Years* (1969) is comprised of a 20-volume book that lists the million years that preceded the work's inception, as well as the million years that are in the process of succeeding 1996 A.D. The subtitle for the first set of volumes reads "For all those who have lived and died." This is a small addition to the annals of billions of people, long lines of humanity stretching over horizons of space and time, the known and the unknown. And barely overlapping those two dates lays an infinitesimally small span of time — the life of Kawara himself. It was carefully cordoned off and diligently recorded, until it's not there anymore.

In another series, Kawara sent telegrams to friends and acquaintances, simply proclaiming, "I AM STILL ALIVE." That affirmation, in the face of the difficulty of being a person, both ontologically and just physically, is deeply affecting. They are messages filled with love and tenderness, a recognition that something mundane and approaching the miraculous has happened, again. Finitude, and our resistance to it at each moment, is something that Kawara noted with exceptional concision and dignity. That is now finished. His death marks both the succinctness of his work, and serves as its ultimate frame. It was the only trajectory the work could have ever taken, but that doesn't make its sting any less acute. He was alive. That's important. The world preceded him and time continues. We (other people) continue — an equally valuable recognition. But he will be missed.