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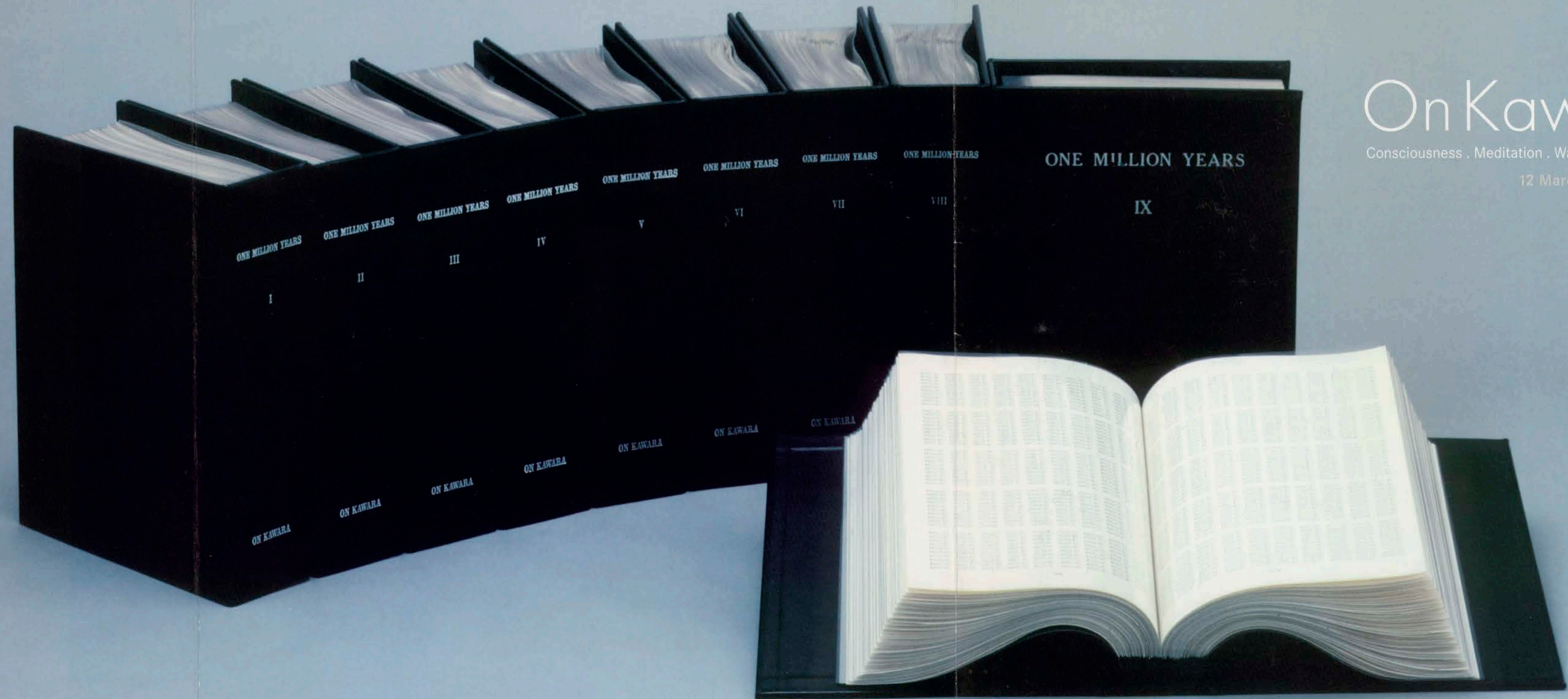


The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is a museum that fosters the development and interpretation of contemporary art.

On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the hills. originated at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and was organised in collaboration with Le Consortium, Dijon. Supported by the Lion Foundation.

IKON

Le Consortium



On Kawara

Consciousness . Meditation . Watcher on the hills

12 March - 8 May 2005

On Kawara

Consciousness . Meditation . Watcher on the hills

On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the hills. is a major retrospective exhibition of Japanese born artist On Kawara, one of the world's most respected and influential contemporary artists. The Govett Brewster Art Gallery is the only Australasian venue for this major exhibition, touring the world from West to East, which includes works from major public and private collections worldwide.

The exhibition focuses on Kawara's ongoing preoccupation with the nature of human consciousness. Together his work states his conviction that although temporality and duration are determined objectively, they are always experienced subjectively. Although simple and direct in appearance, Kawara's work communicates a profound message. His work represents the passage of time, the nature of consciousness and ultimately human mortality.

From the mid 1960s Kawara lived mostly in New York and was part of a group of artists which included a number of the protagonists of minimalist, pop and conceptual art movements such as Dan Graham, Roy Lichtenstein, Joseph Kosuth and New Zealand artist Billy Apple.

In the 1960s when conceptual art first emerged, New York was the centre of the art world. America was in the throes of the Vietnam conflict and the widespread social reforms largely brought about by vocal opposition to the status quo of the 'system'. In 1968 there were protests and uprisings in the United States, France, Japan, Mexico and Italy. At the heart of all these challenges to the status quo was the drive to reassess and change modes of operation. Conceptual art came about as the result of a conscious decision to break with the traditional 'object', and with it the reliance on material, and address the importance of the idea.

Today series

Time has been central to On Kawara's work since the mid 1960s and is marked by the first 'date painting' on 4 January, 1966 when he began what he refers to as the *Today series*. There are now more than 2,000 'date paintings' in the series. Each painting depicts only the date on which it was painted and is essentially a record of the artist's existence on that day. If he does not complete the work by midnight, he destroys the painting. Kawara considers the series to be a single ongoing work that will be completed at the end of his lifetime.

The paintings exhibited in *Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the hills.* are all Sundays, ranging in time from 1966 to 2005. By choosing to exhibit only the date paintings painted

on Sundays, exhibition Curator Jonathan Watkins has drawn a representative selection from the series by a seemingly arbitrary method. However, Sunday as a day brings its own meaning to the exhibition. Sunday is the most culturally significant day of the week. It is simultaneously a day of religious observance, the first day of the week and the last day of the week; even in secular life Sunday remains largely a day of rest.

The origin of the date paintings can be traced to the 1965 painting *Title*, a three panel textual and numerical work which states: 'ONE THING', '1965', 'VIET-NAM'. The placement of the date on the central panel establishes the notion of time as a dominant theme. It also establishes the basic format of the date paintings with the use of white text on a solid background.

In March of 1965 the first American combat troops were sent to Vietnam to join the other 23,000 military personnel already there. The personal significance of Kawara's reference to Vietnam can only be guessed at. Kawara was thirteen years old when World War II ended in Japan with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the aftermath of which included the presence of American troops in Japan. The involvement of the United States military in Asia was to characterise the next two decades, something that Kawara must have been only too aware of.

Each date painting is carefully painted by hand. Kawara begins with a stretched canvas on which he lays down several layers of paint that is specially mixed for each painting. Once the background is built up Kawara then begins the process of hand painting the date. The order of day, month, year is determined by the country in which Kawara is in on the day. Esperanto is used for languages such as Japanese that do not use Roman letters.

The paintings are made in eight different sizes. Some days Kawara will paint as many as three small paintings, most days he makes none. Differences can be seen in the way the date is depicted - the text has changed over time - and in the subtleties in the colour of the background. Some of the early paintings had blue or red backgrounds, but most are made up of dark grey-browns, grey-greens or blues that verge on black.

The daily mixing of paint and the careful build up of layers gives each painting its own subtle differences. All these variations, however small, show the presence of the artist in the making of the work.

Each painting is stored in its own handmade cardboard box when not on display. Many of the boxes are lined with a newspaper clipping from the day the painting was made, giving the date a point of reference. The early works were also subtitled with diary like notes such as "I thought about memory and sense", "I am painting this painting", "Taeko kissed me. I asked her 'are you alright?'" and even "New Zealand's fifth Maori King, Koroki Te Wherowhero, 54, has died at Nagruawahia". Several of the early date paintings have subtitles which refer to the conflict in



7FEV.1969
Container for FEB.27,1990
MAR.30,1997 in progress

Vietnam and many of the newspaper clippings feature articles about the conflict.

In more recent date paintings the subtitles only refer to the day of the week and there are no newspaper clippings lining the box. The last subtitle that described more than the day was painted on 28 December 1972 in Stockholm. It was subtitled 'Jag vet inte'. Written in Swedish because Kawara was in Sweden, it translates as 'I don't know' the next painting, painted the next day, was subtitled only with the name of the day.

It is not clear why Kawara stopped using descriptive subtitles and newspaper clippings; perhaps references to specific events gave too much direction. A date on its own, without a specific point of reference is more broadly contemplative. It is this expansiveness that makes Kawara's work both impersonal and deeply humanistic all at once.

The inclusion of the rarely seen drawing *Sundays of 100 years* in the exhibition provides another insight into Kawara's preoccupation with movement through time. The drawing's grid like structure of dates echoes the layout of the works *One million years - past* and *One million years - future* while the Sundays of the title refer back to the selection of only Sunday date paintings for the exhibition.

One million years

These two works mark the passage of time in a way similar to the *Today series*. *One million years - past* 1970 - 1971 was the first work in the two work series followed by the beginning of *One million years - future* 1980 - 1998 ten years later.

Each book has twenty thousand pages of typewritten years in order, following the Western calendar, with 500 years per page. The pages are kept in plastic sleeves which are ring-bound in a leather cover embossed with the title of the work and the volume number.

One million years - past stretches back from 1969, the other *One million years - future* stretches forwards from 1980. They are dedicated respectively to 'all those who have lived and died' and to 'the last one'. The length of a human life is equivalent to a few lines, and human history to a few pages. The time span of all humanity, past and future, is easily imagined as being a fleeting thing.

The ten year gap in Kawara's exhaustive listing of years might at first seem uncharacteristic considering his thoroughness. Kawara did not recover the 'lost' time between the two works but left it out. He recorded time back and then forwards from the year it was when the works were made. *One million years - future* had to be for the years yet to come so he could be accurate in pinpointing his own movement through time.

By their sheer scope the *One million years* works turn time

into an abstract concept. Yet at the same time viewing a page of the book which includes years from living memory personalises the concept of time. The co-existence of these two states creates the kind of temporal illusion typical in the work of On Kawara.

I am still alive

I am still alive is one of a number of series of works in which Kawara uses everyday methods of written communication to affirm his existence.

Kawara began *I am still alive* in 1970 when he sent the first of many telegrams bearing the message 'I am still alive' to friends and colleagues. Kawara's use of the telegram, a traditional mode of announcing urgent news, plays with the passing of time. The receiver knows that when Kawara sent the telegram he was alive. However, what they can't be sure of is whether Kawara is still alive when they read it, rendering the truth of the message uncertain and questioning with gentle humour whether we can ever be sure of anything.

Now, with the almost total replacement of telegrams by fax and email, Kawara sends far fewer telegrams than he used to (he has chosen not to update the work into a more contemporary medium) making his statement of existence more rare and precious as time passes.

Kawara has made other works which are similar to the telegrams. The postcard works of the *I got up* series involved Kawara sending two identical postcards to two different people bearing the rubber stamped message 'I got up at' and the time he arose on that day. Each card is also stamped with the date, then numbered and marked with Kawara's, often temporary, address.

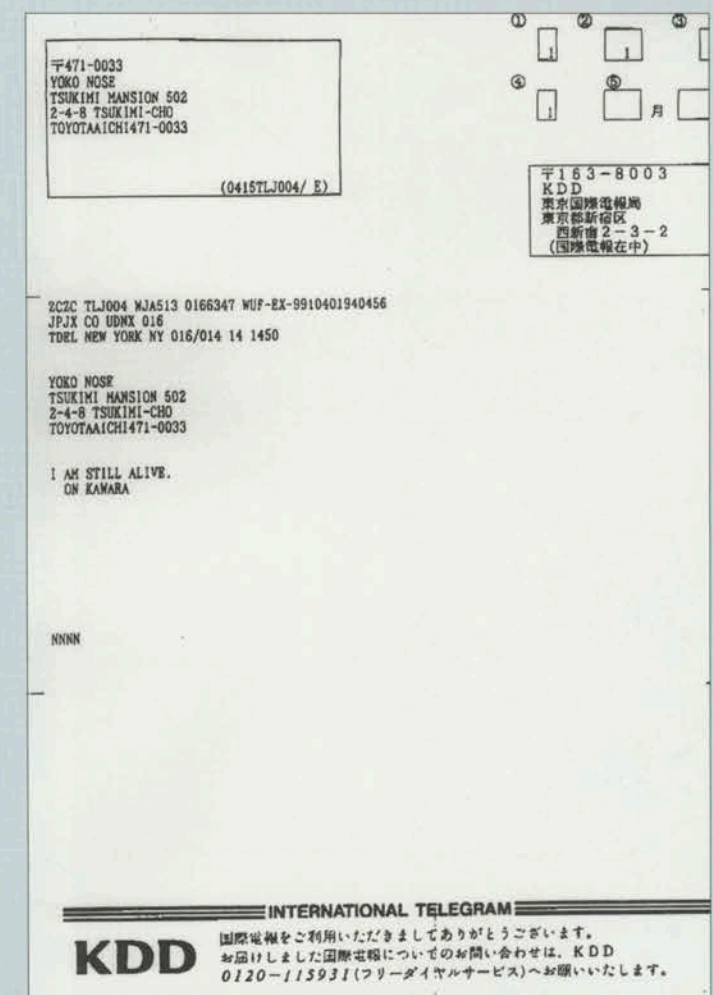
Between July 1968 and June 1969 On Kawara lived in South America, Europe, Japan and New York during this time of nomadic existence Kawara began the notebook pieces *I met* and *I went* keeping a record of everybody he met and everywhere he went as if to give himself some kind of solidity while constantly on the move.

All of these works reveal the everyday minutiae of life - by stating 'I am still alive', 'I got up at', 'I met' and 'I went' Kawara records the unremarkable activities we undertake on a daily basis. However, as is typical of Kawara these records can also be remarkable - both in their proof of his enduring commitment to marking the passage of time and also as records of remarkable days and events. When we get up we are not always aware of whom we will meet or where we will go, any day can turn into a remarkable day.

The series' *I got up*, *I met* and *I went* were ended on 17 September 1979 after the theft of Kawara's briefcase which

contained the rubber stamps required to make the works. Kawara's decision not to replace them, thus ending the works, was based on the same acceptance of the movement of time and the ebb and flow of existence that is present in all of his work.

Compiled by Charlotte Huddleston



Telegram from the *I am still alive* series

The history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is closely aligned with that of the *Today series*. The first Director was appointed in January 1967. The Gallery opened on 22 February 1970 with the groundbreaking interactive installation *Real Time*. Since then the Govett-Brewster has continued to have a close association with conceptual art.