

## On Kawara

### *Date Paintings*

November 21, 2024–January 11, 2025  
24 Grafton Street, London

### *Early Works*

November 23, 2024–January 25, 2025  
108, rue Vieille du Temple, Paris



Left: On Kawara, *JUNE 8, 1966*, 1966. Right: On Kawara, *Untitled*, 1956

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Courtesy One Million Years Foundation and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce two exhibitions of paintings by On Kawara (1932–2014), which will be on view concurrently at the gallery's London and Paris locations. The presentations are organized in collaboration with the One Million Years Foundation, established by the artist during his lifetime to ensure the legacy of his work and fluid approach to his practice. These exhibitions are the gallery's first presentations of Kawara's work since his death in 2014 and offer a rare opportunity to view two significant bodies of his paintings.

Over more than five decades, Kawara developed a distinct and highly nuanced form of artistic expression that engaged with chronological time and its function as a measure of human existence. A key figure in the conceptual art movement that emerged in New York in the 1960s, the artist created a significant body of work organized into discrete series that together form a meditative examination of time and place. At once specific and universal, rigorous and expansive, Kawara's work encompasses the simultaneous mundanity and vastness of lived experience, and allows for a multiplicity of meanings.

On view in London will be twenty-four paintings from Kawara's signature *Today* series—known collectively as his Date Paintings. Deceptively simple, each composition—which consists of a calendar date rendered in a distinctive sans serif typeface created by the artist against a monochromatic ground in

one of three colors—is the result of an established protocol and series of decisions that are at once highly ordered and situationally responsive. Each of the paintings conforms to one of eight standard sizes and was carefully executed by hand on the date documented on the canvas (if the work was not completed by midnight, the canvas would be destroyed). As part of his process, Kawara would mix the color for each individual composition, meticulously overlaying the date in white lettering in the language and grammatical conventions of the country in which it is made (Esperanto is substituted when the primary language of the country he was in did not use the Roman alphabet).

Spanning almost the entire range of this body of work from 1966, the year Kawara began the series, to 2012, shortly before its conclusion, the exhibition will feature a representative selection that includes several large-scale paintings, a diptych made in Mexico City in April 1968, and one painting from every year of the 1970s. Viewed together, these paintings showcase both the formal and conceptual breadth of this decades-long project. Through their straightforward and direct composition, these works suggest a profound message, addressing not only the passage of time but the nature of consciousness itself. As curator Jeffrey Weiss notes, “On the one hand, the painting attempts to hold, or seize, a given day. It represents the day on which it was made, and if it’s not finished by the time the day comes to an end, it is destroyed. On the other hand, of course, the day itself is something that has already passed by the time the painting is experienced by us. Time can’t be stopped.”<sup>1</sup>

The presentation in Paris will feature four rarely seen early paintings made by Kawara in Tokyo in 1955 and 1956. For the young artist, an active and vocal participant in the city’s avant-garde, painting provided an avenue for thinking through the palpable collective trauma that loomed over his native country in the postwar years. Kawara quickly distinguished himself from his peers; rather than depicting atrocities that remained fresh in the minds of Japanese citizens, the artist chose to evoke their psychological resonances, marshaling form and content in service of one another to channel the elusive feelings of unease, anger, and disillusionment. These enigmatic and highly accomplished works, which count among the earliest known instances of an artist working on shaped canvases, simultaneously seem to collapse and expand space, drastically unmooring the viewer’s understanding of perspective and testifying to the experience of a particular time and place.

In the mid-1960s, prior to beginning his Date Paintings, Kawara donated the majority of his extant works from the 1950s to The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo—almost as a ritual of closure before he moved into a new phase of artistic production. He kept fewer than ten paintings from this period, including those that will be on view in Paris. Featuring easily identifiable and recurrent motifs—such as worms and maggots, domestic furniture, and empty dishes—that collide with kaleidoscopically patterned, claustrophobic settings, these vivid compositions seem to stand in diametric opposition to the straightforward works for which Kawara would later become known. Yet, in many ways these paintings inform that which followed, demonstrating the artist’s nascent interest in themes that he would later elaborate to great effect, including serial repetition, abstracted forms, chromatic expression, and existentialism.

Born in Kariya, Japan, On Kawara (29,771 days) moved to Tokyo in 1951 immediately after graduating from high school, where he established himself as a key member of the rising postwar avant-garde.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Weiss, transcript of “On Kawara: 48 Years, 1966–2014.” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, February 3, 2015, accessed online.

Kawara left Japan in 1959, moving to Mexico City for several years, during which time he studied modern art and traveled around the country—a period that proved formative in the development of his later work. Between 1962 and 1964, he lived between New York and Paris, before settling permanently in New York, though he would continue to travel extensively for the rest of his career, making work in countries around the world.

Kawara's work has been represented by David Zwirner since 1999. Solo exhibitions at the gallery include *I READ 1966–1995* (1999), *Reading One Million Years (Past and Future)* (2001), *Paintings of 40 Years* (2004), and *One Million Years* (2009). In 2012, *On Kawara: Date Painting(s) in New York and 136 Other Cities*, which presented more than 150 Date Paintings selected by the artist, marked his fifth solo exhibition at the gallery in New York and was accompanied by an eponymous, fully illustrated catalogue published by Ludion.

The artist started exhibiting in Tokyo in the early 1950s. In the years since, his works have been included in numerous conceptual art surveys from the seminal *Information* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970 to *1965–1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1995. Important early solo shows include *On Kawara, 1973 – Produktion eines Jahres/One Year's Production* at the Kunsthalle Bern and the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in 1974; *On Kawara: continuity/discontinuity 1963–1979*, which was first on view at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1980 and traveled to the Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; and The National Museum of Art, Osaka; *On Kawara: Date paintings in 89 Cities*, which toured from 1991 to 1993 to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Deichtorhallen Hamburg; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *On Kawara: Whole and Parts 1964–1995*, on view from 1996 to 1998 at the Nouveau Musée/Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne, France; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Musée d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; and *On Kawara: Horizontality/Verticality* at the Städtischen Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Munich, and Museum Ludwig, Cologne, in 2000–2001.

Kawara's project *One Million Years* is a monumental series of twenty-four works comprising *One Million Years [Past]*, which was dedicated to "all those who have lived and died," and *One Million Years [Future]*, addressed to "the last one." The *Past* volumes, noting each year over an entire millennium from 998,031 BC, were started in 1970 and took two years to complete, while *Future*, begun in 1980, was written over the span of eighteen years and finishes at 1,001,997 AD. Together, the volumes account for two million years. The first audio presentation of *One Million Years*, where male and female volunteers alternately speak the dates aloud, took place at Dia Center for the Arts, New York, in 1993, and other venues have included Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2000); David Zwirner, New York (2001 and 2009); Documenta 11, Kassel (2002); Trafalgar Square, London (a continuous outdoor reading organized by the South London Gallery lasting seven days and seven nights, 2004); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2010); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, England (2012); Jardin des Tuileries, Paris (organized in conjunction with FIAC by Galerie Martine Aboucaya and Galerie Yvon Lambert, 2012); Dia Beacon, New York (2013); and BOZAR – Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels (2013). In 2017, a reading took place in the Oratorio di San Ludovico Dorsoduro, Venice, as part of the 57th Venice Biennale (organized by Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England). More recent readings have been held at venues such as the Museum MACAN, Jakarta (2018–2019); Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (2021); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2021); Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, Germany (2021); Saint-Martin Bookshop, Brussels (2022); FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art,

Ohio (2022); and Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2023–2024). Readings from the books, which directly follow where the previous venue left off, will continue to take place.

Beginning in 1998, the artist exhibited seven Date Paintings at kindergartens around the world under the title *Pure Consciousness*. Among other locations, the paintings have been presented in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Leticia, Colombia; Toliara, Madagascar; London; Thimphu, Bhutan; Bequia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Yusuvara, Japan; Bethlehem; Brooklyn, New York; Tongyeong, South Korea; Münster, Germany; and Dazaifu, Japan.

Starting at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, in 2002, *On Kawara: Consciousness. Meditation. Watcher on the Hills* traveled clockwise around the world to a dozen venues including Le Consortium, Dijon, France; Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany; Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore; and The Power Plant, Toronto, before ending at the Museo de Arte in Lima in 2006. In 2015, a critically acclaimed, career-spanning exhibition of the artist's work, *On Kawara—Silence*, was organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Curated by Jeffrey Weiss with Anne Wheeler, it marked the first full representation of Kawara's practice beginning in 1964. Also on view in 2015 was a solo show specially focused on Kawara's production in 1966—a pivotal year in his practice—at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle, Belgium. A long-term installation of the artist's Date Paintings is on view at Dia Beacon, New York.

Work by the artist is represented in museum collections internationally, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Kunstmuseum Basel; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Philadelphia Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Tate, United Kingdom; Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota City, Japan; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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