

A Special Collection of Todays.



Kasper König's and On Kawara's Time Together

3,985 days lie between the birthdays of On Kawara, born in 1932 in Kariya, Japan, and Kasper König, born in 1943 in Mettingen, Münsterland, Germany—exactly ten years, ten months, four weeks, and one day. The artist, one of the key figures of conceptual art, and the visionary curator were linked by a long and intimate friendship. At first glance, the two seem to be polar opposites: On Kawara had not appeared in public since the 1960s, giving no interviews, refusing to be photographed, not appearing at his own exhibition openings, and revealing in his biography only the number of days he had lived.¹ The artist maintained this deliberate distance and secrecy from the public until his death in 2014. In contrast, Kasper König's bustling, extroverted nature gave him a great talent for networking: Wherever something new and exciting was happening in the arts, he was there, or even significantly involved. The nearly fifty-year friendship between this seemingly disparate pair² is also a story of fruitful exchange and mutual inspiration between two outstanding figures in the art world.

They Met

On Kawara and Kasper König first met in New York in 1967, after König had arrived in the American art metropolis in 1965. Originally traveling as a courier for the Robert Fraser Gallery in London,³ he ended up staying there on and off until 1978. The great distance from his homeland came in handy for Rudolf Hans König (his birth name) in those years, since he had refused to do his military service and had escaped alternative service. More importantly, the twenty-two-year-old found the inspiration he was looking for in the vibrant New York art scene.

He soon began working with Claes Oldenburg, whose studio was located in the same building complex where On Kawara had his studio, along with many other artists.⁴

On Kawara had also arrived in New York in 1965 via intermediate stops. After becoming a highly regarded artist in Japan at a young age, he became so dissatisfied with the increasing media interest in his person that he traveled to Mexico in 1959. Six years later, with stops in New York and Paris, he settled in the American metropolis. But travel would remain part of his artistic practice. In this way, Kawara placed the categories of space and time at the center of his life and later his work, a decision that would determine everything from then on.

The New York painter Peter Dechar had already told König about the Japanese artist in Germany. König experienced his first meeting with On Kawara on March 9, 1967, as a very special encounter; he sent a telegram to the artist and his partner Hiroko Hiraoka just a few hours after they parted, thanking them for the inspiring exchange.⁵ Kawara also recorded the meeting in his *Journal*: "Peter, Reeva, Kasper and Barbara came to my flat just before midnight."⁶

By this time, Kawara had already made the most important decision for the further development of his artistic work: A break with his early figurative work had been in the making for years, and it manifested itself in a life-changing way at the beginning of 1966: On January 4, the artist began the *Today* series (1966–2013), which he would continue for almost fifty years and which consists of thousands of so-called *Date Paintings* (fig. 1). The paintings were created according to strict rules: Each painting shows only the date of its execution. If the painting was not finished by midnight, the artist destroyed it. Kawara defined eight possible formats for his *Date Paintings*, as well as three monochrome background colors: dark gray, red, and blue. Because the pigments of the Liquitex paint were mixed by hand, and each painting consists of a multitude of thin layers of paint, no two *Date Paintings* are the same. Kawara wrote the date in white, sans serif letters and numbers in the language and spelling of the country he was in. If the artist was in a country where the Latin alphabet was not used, he would write the date in Esperanto.

fig. 1
On Kawara's studio, 13th Street,
New York, 1966

In New York, the young budding curator König moved within a broad network that included artists such as Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, and John Chamberlain. In this vibrant environment, where conceptual art forms were being tested and traditional genres such as painting were being questioned, he met Kawara, an artist committed to painting. By combining his conceptual rules with a profound reflection on the act of painting, Kawara had found a way out of painting's crisis in the *Today* series.

The *Date Paintings* are not to be understood as a critique of painting, but rather as a radical merging of idea and material. The clear decisions that Kawara, who was ten years older than König, had made for himself and his work at this point—the concept of the *Today* series, his turning away from the public, and his decision to see travel as part of his artistic practice—were certainly a fascinating model for the young König, who was still discovering his own role in the art world, and prepared the ground for an intense exchange between the two.



fig. 3
On Kawara, *I Got Up* (27 April 1968), 1968
Postcard sent to Mr. And Mrs. 1968,
27 ABRIL 1968

I Got Up

Due to his great passion for postcards, König also had a decisive influence on the artist's work. The first card he received from On Kawara and Hiroko Hiraoka was sent to him in August 1967 after a visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art—labeled only with a date, their names, and the admission tickets taped to it (fig. 2). When Kawara and his partner were planning a year-long trip through South America, König supported their plans and gave them both 200 dollars—a lot of money for the living conditions of the people involved at the time. He suggested that Kawara send him postcard greetings in return. In fact, the artist took this “commission” very seriously and, beginning in April 1968, sent König a postcard every day for the duration of the trip—tourist postcards with varying content: Sometimes there was a stamped line with hand-drawn squiggles (a personal kind of doodling



fig. 2
Postcard from On Kawara and Hiroko Hiraoka to Kasper König, Philadelphia, August 17, 1967

by Kawara), sometimes the artist noted what he had eaten or whom he had spoken to—including fleeting encounters with hotel staff—and asked for their signature (fig. 3). Although the content of the messages he sent varied at first, early on the artist had a stamp made for König's address. Later, the stamped address of Kawara's current location and the numbering of the postcards were added. From this postcard project for Kasper König, the artist eventually developed the final form of his *I Got Up* series, which began on May 10, 1968, and in which Kawara sent nothing more than the exact time he got up, down to the minute, to two addressees each day. König's passion for postcards thus provided the impetus for two central series in Kawara's work: In addition to the postcard series *I Got Up*, there is the series *I Met*, in which the artist used a typewriter to list the names of people he met each day on plain paper. Together with the series *I Went*, in which Kawara recorded each day's route through various cities on different continents and oceans using copied maps, they form the so-called *Trilogy*, which Kawara executed daily from 1968 to 1979. Over the years, König received hundreds of postcards from the artist, he is named on 471 pages of the *I Met* series (fig. 4), and the artist and König visited each other in many places around the world and undertook *I Went* walks together (fig. 5).

They Went

Shortly after they met, König began promoting the Japanese artist's unique work in Europe. During this time, he recommended several American-based artists to the Dusseldorf gallerist Konrad Fischer for his program, including Kawara.⁷ After Fischer visited Kawara's studio, the gallerist offered him a solo exhibition of the *Today* series, but it was too early. The artist explained that he had given himself a five-year trial period, after which he would be able to decide whether he could make the series for the rest of his life. Only then could he sell the *Date Paintings*. The gallerist had to wait until 1972 to present the first exhibition of the *Date Paintings* in Europe.⁸

A milestone in Kawara's exhibition history was his first institutional solo exhibition, curated by Kasper König, at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1974. He, On Kawara, and Hiroko Kawahara⁹ had been in contact since 1969 about a comprehensive museum exhibition. After König had been impressed by an exhibition on Hans Scharoun at the Kunsthalle Bern, he assumed that this was the right place

to make Kawara's work better known in Europe. He persuaded the then director of the Kunsthalle Bern, Johannes Gachnang, to exhibit the Japanese artist's work at his institution, and together with Kawara developed the concept for the show. The exhibition was titled *1973 – Produktion eines Jahres* (Production of a Year) and showed exactly that: all of the artist's works and series from 1973, thus presenting the full range of his current creative output.¹⁰ The catalogue published at the time, with its impressive matter-of-factness, can be seen as a blueprint for subsequent catalogues on Kawara's work. The next major museum exhibition in Europe followed only a few years later, mediated by Pontus Hultén, founding director of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, which had opened only a few months earlier. From March to May 1977, ninety-seven *Date Paintings* were shown there.¹¹



fig. 4
On Kawara, *I Met* (MAY 23 1974), 1974

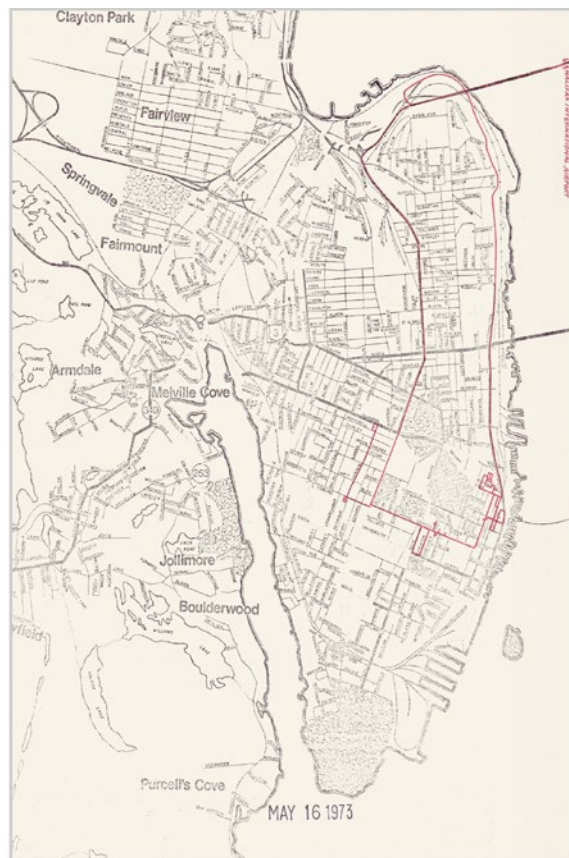


fig. 5
On Kawara, *I Went* (MAY 16 1973), 1973
On Kawara visited Kasper König during his visiting professorship at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax

In 1989, König sent twenty-four *Date Paintings* from 1966 to 1988 on tour for the exhibition *On Kawara. Wieder und Wider / Again and Against / 反復と対立*. They were shown in Frankfurt am Main, Chicago, Nagoya, and Sydney, and thus on four different continents.¹² At each venue, local curators selected twenty-four works by other artists to be presented alongside the *Date Paintings*. The first exhibition was co-curated by König and Ulrich Wilmes for the Portikus exhibition hall in Frankfurt am Main. Here, the *Date Paintings* were juxtaposed with works by Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Christa Näher, Thomas Bayrle, Thomas Schütte, Dieter Roth, George Brecht, and Edward Ruscha, among others. The common denominator of all these exhibitions is a deliberately direct presentation of Kawara's works—without a theoretical superstructure. This shows how convinced König was of the fact-based openness of Kawara's works. Neither König nor Kawara had a particular message, nor did they want to convert anyone with art.

During his tenure as director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, König's exhibition program also included a show of Kawara's work, *Horizontality / Verticality*, which the curator Ulrich Wilmes had brought to the Rhine from the Lenbachhaus in Munich.¹³ Of all the exhibitions curated by König, the *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster, which have been taking place since 1977, are of particular significance. As with all previous editions, König was also the artistic director in 2017, this time together with Britta Peters and Marianne Wagner. As a satellite project, *On Kawara's Pure Consciousness* was realized for this purpose, dedicated to a special group of viewers: children. For this project, the seven *Date Paintings* from January 1 to 7, 1997, have been installed in nursery schools around the world since 1998: in Sydney, Reykjavik, Abidjan, Shanghai, and the Colombian rainforest, among other places. The only instruction given by the artist is that the children are not to be told anything about the pictures. Surrounded by children's drawings, toys, and educational materials, they suddenly appear and, simply lined up next to each other, blend in unobtrusively with the nursery school rooms (fig. 6).¹⁴ At the artist's request, *Pure Consciousness* continues beyond his death.¹⁵ Just as he was always on the move, his paintings will now continue to travel. On the one hand, *Pure Consciousness* in Münster was the first realization of the project after the artist's death, and as such it is a final act of friendship on the part of the curator for his deceased artist friend. On the other hand, the *Skulptur Projekte*, which take place every ten years, are an extremely

suitable framework for *Pure Consciousness*. The children who spent time with the *Date Paintings* in 2017 will already be teenagers at the next *Skulptur Projekte*. Some of them may remember the rather unusual visit of the paintings in their nursery school, while others may not. The basic idea of the project is deliberately non-didactic and is emphasized in a special way through the extensive temporal dimension of the *Skulptur Projekte*. Kasper König has always defended the almost ridiculously long period of ten years for a recurring exhibition format. König's enthusiasm for extremely long time spans, which are also central to many of Kawara's works, becomes tangible here, such as 100 years in *24,698 Days (100 Years Calendar)* from 2000, or even a million years—into the past and into the future—in the works *One Million Years [Past]*, 1970–71, and *One Million Years [Future]*, 1980–98.

Encounter in the Unconventional

The daring transgressions of (temporal) boundaries with which Kawara confronted himself and the viewer were consciously chosen. The impossible, the intangible must have appealed to him as an artistic theme—after all, neither he nor anyone else will ever be able to see his *Today* series in its entirety. Each individual painting is both a reflection on a specific unit of time and part of a series that can only be imagined, consisting of several thousand individual works. This kind of subtle ambiguity can also be read humorously as an intentional paradox—a kind of humor that Kasper König shared.

König expressed his fascination with Kawara's work as ambivalence: On the one hand, it could be read as incredibly complex, and at the same time, it is largely self-explanatory. The simultaneous illumination of the general and the concrete was what König described as “the driving force in the artist's work.”¹⁶ König associated this approach with anthropology, in which he was very interested and about which he attended lectures at The New School for Social Research in New York. He did not pursue a degree, however, and this was another thing that united the friends: Neither of them had come to their professions through formalized educational paths, but had simply followed their own paths, one as a high school dropout (König), the other as an autodidact (Kawara).

On closer inspection, this encounter in the unconventional seems to be the basis of the bond between König and Kawara. König—this much we know for sure—was least interested in conventions, and although Kawara's work appears to be strongly rule-based, it is decidedly undogmatic. The artist himself decided whether to make a *Date Painting* or not—the rules did not dictate this. This was an act of free artistic self-determination that should not be underestimated. At the same time, the artist elegantly freed himself from the heavy, grueling pressure of artistic innovation. Although the *Date Paintings* follow the same pattern of creation, the numbers and figures painted differ from each other. The coloring of each painting is also unique, and contrary to what one might think, it is not so much the identical parts of the series that are interesting, but rather the differences between the paintings that distinguish the series.

In 1979, the artist's briefcase was stolen in a bank in Stockholm. The thief probably expected a promising haul from a traveling Japanese “business-



fig. 6
On Kawara: *Pure Consciousness*, realized in the Städtische Kita und Familienzentrum Berg Fidel, Münster, in conjunction with the 2017 *Skulptur Projekte*, Münster

man.” The surprise must have been great when he found the materials for the *Trilogy* series in the bag: copied city maps, postcards, paper, and a stamp set! Having lost his materials, the artist decided without further ado to finish the series he had been working on every day for over eleven years. This surprisingly pragmatic and completely non-nostalgic decision brought a smile to König’s face.

König was crucial to the development of Kawara’s career— but one should not underestimate how important Kawara was to König. Kawara’s distanced view of the art world may have encouraged König early on to maintain his characteristic nonconformity. Looking back, the curator himself said of Kawara’s art and its influence on him: “I realized a lot about where things are decided. How I deal with art, for example. It created a focus, literally brought something into focus.”¹⁷

The friends, who seemed so different at first glance, shared a great deal of flexibility and freedom of thought. They met at a crucial time in their lives and remained connected through mutual inspiration.

Ten years, one month, and two weeks lie between the deaths of On Kawara and Kasper König. Their common path connected them for 17,278 days—these days were their Special Collection of Today’s.

- 1 On Kawara’s life data is only ever given as 29,771 days.
- 2 The friendship between König and Kawara extended to their families. Kasper and Ilka König’s first-born daughter, Lili König, is the youngest recipient of I Got Up postcards. Their second daughter, Hiroko König, was named after Kawara’s wife.
- 3 König was a courier for a work by Francis Picabia. During the voyage, he was hired as a cook in the galley.
- 4 On February 4, 1967, the subtitle of a date painting by Kawara refers to Oldenburg: “C. Oldenburg and J. Klein came to my studio this afternoon. In the evening I went to Oldenburg’s studio to ask him if I could use my asking him as the title of this painting.” Later, in February 1967, John Chamberlain took over Kawara’s studio in this building complex, where Larry Rivers and Yayoi Kusama, among others, also worked.
- 5 On Kawara’s partner, Hiroko Hiraoka, was an artist herself and came to New York from Japan in 1962.
- 6 On Kawara documented the production of his date paintings in his Journals. Each painting was given an entry with the date, a subtitle and details about format, and color. The people mentioned here are the former couple Peter and Reeva Dechar, Kasper König and his then partner, Barbara Brown.
- 7 König also recommended Sol LeWitt, Richard Artschwager, Bruce Nauman, Robert Ryman, Robert Smithson, and others to the Konrad Fischer Galerie.
- 8 On Kawara: Today Series, Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf, 1972. This was the first exhibition of the Today series in a commercial gallery in Europe. Previously, Kawara had exhibited ninety-seven Date Paintings from 1970 titled Everyday Meditation at the Tokyo Biennale ’70: Between Man and Matter and at the 1971 Guggenheim International in New York.
- 9 After marrying the artist in 1968, Hiroko Hiraoka adopted the surname Kawahara, the artist’s actual family name.
- 10 On Kawara. 1973 – Produktion eines Jahres, Kunsthalle Bern, August 31–October 6, 1974.
- 11 On Kawara 97 “date paintings” consécutive journaux de 1966 à 1975, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, March 30–May 16, 1977.
- 12 The stations were: Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, March 13–April 26, 1989; The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, May 10–June 25, 1989; Institute of Contemporary Art, Nagoya, November 4–December 24, 1989; Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, April 5–May 5, 1990.
- 13 On Kawara. Horizontality / Verticality, curated by Ulrich Wilmes, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Munich, October 21, 2000–January 14, 2001; Museum Ludwig, Cologne, March 9–June 4, 2001.
- 14 On Kawara, Pure Consciousness, in conjunction with the 2017 Skulptur Projekte, Münster. The Date Paintings were installed in the Städtische Kita und Familienzentrum Berg Fidel before the official opening and duration of Skulptur Projekte, namely from March 13 to 31, 2017. During the Skulptur Projekte, a (documentary) presentation about the project Pure Consciousness from 1998 to 2017 was shown in the Kunstmuseum Pablo Picasso Münster, both projects realized by the author.
- 15 Besides Pure Consciousness, the One Million Years Readings are Kawara’s only project that continues even after his death.
- 16 Kasper König in conversation with the author, January 4, 2015 [translated].
- 17 Ibid. [translated].

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