



If I met On Kawara, I would ask him why he invented a fictional name in his teen's.

Huang-chuan Yi

Make Your Name Foreign

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On Kawara uses the utopian language, Esperanto,  
when he creates his Date Paintings in Japan, Korea, or other Asian countries.

By examining this fact, I will investigate historical transformations of the condition of  
Japanese identity.

I will contextualize On Kawara as a rare subject who formed his strong leftist identity  
during the 1950s in Japan . . .

then immigrated abroad while repressing his national identity, if only temporarily.

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On Kawara was 12 years old when two atomic bombs ended WWII  
or "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."

He had just graduated from high school the year before the American Occupation  
ended in 1952.

The Occupation transformed Japan into a semi-colony of the United States.

U.S. set Japan against the communist regime, censored media, reformed educational texts, and rewrote the Japanese constitution.

Within this social atmosphere, On Kawara emerged a young artist in The 4th Nippon Independent Exhibition, in 1952 in Tokyo . . .

it was sponsored by the Yomiuri newspaper company, eager to liberalize its editorial tenets, which had been under the state control during wartime.

Kawara's surrealist narrative drawings (Surreal Documentary) depicted workers or dismembered masses within a claustrophobic urban environment.

Notably, his signature on canvas was written in "katakana," the kind of Japanese characters frequently used for imported words.

This practice of signing your name in katakana is sometimes used in postmodern Japan, but conventionally Japanese artists would sign their names, using either Roman alphabets or Chinese characters.

Signing in katakana suggests that Kawara perceived his self as something foreign to Japanese culture.

Through this particular way of signing his name, Kawara complicated his rejection of the immediate past of nationalist Japan.

During this period, Kawara briefly associated with Demokrato Art Association (i.e. he participated in The 2nd Demokrato Exhibition at Maruzen Gallery in 1953).

The founder of the DAA named the group in Esperanto written in katakana.



The group's members had an ongoing involvement with the Esperanto movement of prewar Japan, which was once repressed by the militants.

Again, Kawara signing his name on canvas in katakana implied to other Japanese people that he had preferred . . .

to identify with the dialectic "foreign and Japanese" katakana over the "Western" alphabets or "official" Chinese characters.

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If the article about Jackson Pollock in Life Magazine (1949) inspired an ambition for fame in the leader of the Gutai group . . .

Mexican Art Exhibition at Tokyo National Museum (1955) presented an opportunity for young Kawara to investigate the history of non-Western art.

He commented in Bijutsu Hihyo (October 1955) on the importance of the socialized art practice in Mexico in comparison with Western modernism.

He also made a cautious warning against the Japanese art world's enthusiasm over Mexican art as a mere novelty or exoticism.

Despite strict restrictions placed on Japanese nationals' traveling overseas, Kawara left for Mexico in 1959 . . .

the same year that millions of Japanese had watched the marriage of the crown prince (Akihito, the current emperor) in front of their new black-and-white television sets.

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Five years later, in 1964, feeling confident of its recent economic growth, Japan finally deregulated overseas travel for the Japanese public.

Increasing Yen power generated a new representation of the Japanese person as a tourist abroad, often in a group, with a camera hanging from his/her neck (i.e. Jacques Tati, *Playtime* in 1967).

Due to advancements in aircraft technology, the Japanese, like the American travelers in Europe, traveled everywhere.

Had the progressive generation of the 1960s been absorbed into the new tourist industry?

Kawara can be located somewhere in between the hippies and Japanese tourists.

He stayed several years in Mexico (participating in a couple of solo and group shows), then traveled to France and other European countries around 1962 . . .

and then finally settled in New York in 1965 at the beginning of the war in Viet Nam.

Initially, his destinations were the locations of active political communities of the Left.

He developed, formalized, and established his work during these travels, leaving the Japanese art world behind.

The forgettable article "On Kawara and Since Then" appeared in *Bijutsu Techo* in 1965 in Japan.

Three years later Lucy Lippard and John Chandler wrote about Kawara's work in "The Dematerialization of Art."

This was the beginning of another history.