

On Kawara

September 30, 1997: 23,662 days

[Note: rather than publish his date of birth, the artist prefers to give his age as the number of days he has lived at a certain moment, in this case the opening of *On the Edge: Contemporary Art* from the Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Collection]

How to tell time—and how to represent it—are among the principal problems of the modern era and of modern art. For many, being modern meant living in the present, if not seeing into the future. For others, modernity was a sliding scale of spatial and temporal awareness. Meanwhile, research into the laws of physics and the existential irregularities of time had thrown all traditional calculations into question.

Nearest to the urgent immediacy celebrated by the early moderns was the exuberant sense of speed and simultaneity found in the spinning, jumbled images of Robert Delaunay, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, and Gino Severini. The working premise of these artists, and of the various space-and-time-fracturing styles they pioneered—Orphism, Cubism, Futurism, and so on—was the notion of depicting an object, or multiple objects, from several vantage points at once, thus condensing separate observational moments into a single pictorial event. At the other extreme was the drawn-out, even static time of the Surrealists—of Alberto Giacometti's frozen *Palace at 4 A.M.* (1932–33), or of Salvador Dalí's *Persistence of Memory* (1931), with its famous melting watches.

Scientific and philosophical speculation paralleled and sometimes provoked these aesthetic experiments. Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity posited a break in temporal continuity based on the spatial separation of two clocks set to the same hour. For his part, the French phenomenologist Henri Bergson explored the discrepancy between strict chronological time and psychological time, that is to say between the measurable fact of minutes ticking into hours, hours into days, days into months, and months into years, and the fluid experience of duration in which time assumes a wondrous elasticity, stretching out or accelerating at unpredictable intervals.

The work of On Kawara literally updates these concerns in the matter-of-fact terms of contemporary systems art. Having started out in the early 1950s making Surrealist-inspired pictures of cataclysmic domestic scenes, Kawara left his native Japan in 1959 and, after sojourns in Mexico and France, settled in New York in 1965. During his time in Paris, Kawara experimented with a variety of styles, in the course of which he began making drawings based on calendars. These works prepared the ground for the conceptual leap he made shortly after his arrival in New York, resulting in a

dramatic reorientation of his art and the integral programming of his production.

On January 4, 1966, Kawara made the first of his "Today" series, of which the work in this collection, *April 24, 1990*, is an example. Each consists of a neatly hand-lettered canvas commemorating the day of its creation. The canvases are stored in specially made cardboard boxes containing pages from a local newspaper of the same day and from whatever place the peripatetic artist happened to find himself in when he made the painting. Kawara does not paint every day—in the first year of this series, he made 241 such works—nor are all his canvases identical; the background tone varies from grays to reds to blues, and the typeface changes as well.

Kawara has also devoted himself to other forms of space-and-time accounting. In the same year as he began the "Today" series he started to keep lists of his encounters, noting the name of the person with whom he had come in contact after the phrase "I MET." In 1968 he began mapping his movements with the series "I WENT," and shortly after that he took to sending daily postcards to friends with the timed and dated message "I GOT UP." These mailings were followed in 1970 by another ongoing series that said "I AM STILL ALIVE, ON KAWARA." Also in 1970 Kawara opened a ledger in which, working back from the present, he began enumerating every year from 998,031 B.C. to 1969 A.D. *One Million Years (Past)*, which eventually ran to ten volumes, is dedicated to "all those who have lived and died." *One Million Years (Future)* continues the same process from 1981 to 1,001,980 A.D., and is inscribed "For the last one."

Kawara's idiosyncratically interconnected tabulations encompass both the small routines that measure out quotidian existence and the virtual infinity of millennia succeeding millennia. At either extreme, Kawara takes care to remind us how time's passage simultaneously isolates individuals in their own reality and binds them to collective reality. This divided consciousness is explicit in *April 24, 1990*. Like every other painting of its kind, it is the work of a man sitting alone at his desk. The physical encapsulation of the time it took to make (because of the layering of paint and the necessary drying periods, completion of each tablet- or tombstonelike work takes many hours), it adds to the series as a whole while it counts down, and so subtracts from, the

APR. 24, 1990

On Kawara. *April 24, 1990.* 1990. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 18 1/4 x 24" (46.3 x 61 cm). The painting is accompanied by a cardboard box (below) made by the artist, containing a dated page from the *New York Times*. Fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser

unknown remainder of its creator's days. Like every other newspaper clipping of its kind, the one accompanying this work contains stories on various topics with various datelines, representing the staggered unfolding of the news. By this pairing — which in spirit as well as juxtapositional technique resembles the time-line portraits of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (see p. 58) — Kawara demonstrates the on-again corresponding or off-again tangential alignment of his own life's span with the inexorable but often absurd march of history. Kawara's idea is simple, as is his means of expression. If one yields to them, however, the thoughts and feelings they elicit are complex and fundamental.

