

Make Your Name Foreign

an essay by Ei Arakawa

On Kawara uses the utopian language, Esperanto, for all his Date paintings produced in Japan, Korea or other Asian countries. By examining this fact, my current project investigates historical transformations of the condition of Japanese identity. 1) I will contextualize On Kawara as a rare subject who formed his strong Leftist identity during the 50s in Japan, then immigrated abroad while keeping his national identity repressed, if only temporarily. 2) I would like to identify the historical tendency of Japanese culture to practice the way of another cultures without drastically repressing its pre-existing cultures; i.e. equalization of symbolic function of the emperor in pre-war, mid-war, and post-war periods.

On Kawara was 12 years old when two atomic bombs ended WWII or “*Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere*.” He had just graduated high school the year before the American occupation ended in 1952. The occupation transformed Japan into a semi-colony of the United States. US positioned Japan against communist regime, censored media, reformed educational texts, and rewrote the Japanese constitution. Within this social atmosphere, On Kawara had emerged a young artist in *4th Nippon (Japan) Independent*, 1952 Tokyo, sponsored by the *Yomiuri News Paper*, which was eager to liberalize from its state’s management during the war. 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 the *Kata-kana* character, the specific Japanese character used for imported words. This practice of signing your name in *Kata-kana* is sometimes used in postmodern Japan, but conventionally Japanese artists would sign using either an alphabetical or Chinese character. Signing in *Kata-kana* suggests that Kawara perceived his self as something foreign to Japanese culture. With this particular way of signing, Kawara complicated his rejection of the Japanese nationalist’s just past. During this period, Kawara briefly associated with *Demokrato Art Association* (i.e. *2nd Demokrato* at *Maruzen Gallery* in 1953). The founding member of the *DAA* named the group in Esperanto written in *Kata-kana*. The group had a continuous involvement with the Esperanto movement of pre-WWII Japan, which was once repressed by the militants. Again, Kawara signing his name on canvas in Esperanto implied to other Japanese people that he had preferred to identify with the dialectic “foreign and Japanese” *Kata-kana* over the “Western” alphabet or “official” Chinese character.

If the article about Jackson Pollack in *Life* magazine (1949) made the mentor of Gutai group ambitious for an establishment in the West, the *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 *Bijyutsu-hihyo*, in October 1955, on the importance of the socialized art practice in Mexico as compared to the canonized Abstract Expressionism in America. He also carefully warned against the Japanese art world’s enthusiasm over Mexican art as mere newness or exoticism. Despite

strict regulations for Japanese traveling overseas, Kawara left for Mexico in 1959, the same year that millions of Japanese had watched the marriage of former prince (current Japanese emperor) in front of new black and white televisions.

Five years later feeling confident of its recent economic growth, Japan finally deregulated overseas tourism for the Japanese public. Increasing Yen power generated a new presentation of the Japanese person as a tourist, 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 hippies of Eisenhower, traveled everywhere. The progressive generation had inevitably 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, the destinations he traveled to were the locations of active political communities of the Left. His work was developed, formalized, and established during these travels leaving the Japanese art world behind. The forgettable article “*On Kawara and Since Then*” appeared in *Bijyutsu-techo* 1965 Tokyo. Three years later Lucy Lippard wrote about Kawara’s work in “*The Dematerialization of Art*”. This was the beginning of another history.

His subsequent travels of the 70s, 80s, and 90s gradually became aimless wandering, the movement of abstracting the world. According to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Japanese living overseas for three months or longer numbered 874,000 in 2002, the highest ever in the history of Japan. This is when one identifies the relationship of postmodern phenomena of the Japanese and the present condition of On Kawara’s Conceptual legacy.

“In 1962 Kawara visited the cave painting of Altamire, which made a profound impression on him. Rather than considering them prehistoric, he saw them as “beyond history” and “beyond language”: for him, they make a direct appeal outside time. Moreover, given that they were executed in artificial light, they bear witness to an extension of diurnal time unprecedented in human history.”¹

Kawara’s universalist experience has been suffered and suffering as it has a mimetic relationship to equalizing tourism. Tourist’s perspective is always at risk to violate the “unknown” land, not unlike his very taboo, *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere*. Did he foreseen the conclusion of his will to continue *Today’s Series* for decades of globalization? Was the desire of erasure of national history ever successful? It is unlikely, yet rejecting nationalist empowerment while distancing your self from hegemony of transnational industries has to be sought out. On Kawara’s Esperanto is a beginning site for this inquiry. To complicate old dialectical status, and to re-execute the strategy that young Kawara signed his own name both foreign and domestic, are much needed tasks not of the past, but of today after the last half of the 20th century.

¹ from the essay by Lynne Cooke for Dia website. http://www.diacenter.org/exhibs_b/kawara/essay.html

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