Space/Time: Matter and Motion in On Kawara

-Nikos Papastergiadis

For these people, the natural world was not an object suitable for experiment, analysis and exploitation. It was not an object at all. It was alive, with certain mysteries and powerful forces, and man's life was possessed a richness and a dignity which came from his sense of participation in the movement of these forces.

—Philip Sherrard, 1956

The end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 60s were a decisive period in On Kawara's life and work. It was in this period that he began his lifelong project of travel and turned toward what he called "primordial" forms of image-making, articulated through direct communication systems and sustained over considerable periods of time. This was also a time when new theories of worldviews were being developed in France, when the ideas of progress and enlightenment that were the foundations of the modern consciousness were being challenged. The scope of the civilizational shift can be measured by the epigraph of this essay, drawn from critic Philip Sherrard's contemporaneous commentary on Greek modernist literature. At one level, Sherrard simply notes the continuities of belief in the cosmos that are from the time of Pythagoras, infusing the littleworld of the peasant and stretching into the imagery of modern poets. At the same time, however, these prefigurative words also register a lament for the loss of the cosmos in our modern world. They denounce the advances of science that have stripped away the superstitions of the past and, in de-sacralising life, have objectified the world, turning it into a resource whose value is only expressed in commodity terms. While On Kawara is only a generation apart from Sherrard, there is a distinct break in their historical consciousness: over the next five decades, On Kawara would develop a practice that revealed a new twist in the nexus between philosophical meaning, aesthetic perception and the movements of the cosmos.

On Kawara travelled widely and was fascinated by daily news events. His famous Date Paintings (1966–2013) were made in over a hundred cities. In 1973 alone he dispatched 1,407 postcards. The city of London was an interruption but a constitutive element in his artworks, which can be seen as documents that both punctuate the flow of time and trace the trajectories of his journeys. Throughout On Kawara's work there is a paradoxical focus on that which zooms in on everyday activities, and another that zooms out towards the fundamental meaning of time and place. Yet there is no over reference to reinserting a spiritual connection to nature in his work: rather, he admitted to a deep fascination with science. In particular, he was interested in how the recent discoveries on the relationship between matter and motion were interconnected with a transformation in our understanding of consciousness. This brings us to one of the great paradoxes in the history of thought. Whereas in the age of the Enlightenment it was science that ushered in the world of mystery, it is through contemporary science that we are discovering the enigmatic interplay between consciousness and the movement of cosmic forces. In this essay, I will argue that the aesthetic order - the cosmos - that arises from On Kawara's practice depends on an attunement to the priority and endlessness of motion.

Nikos Papastergiadis sees a world-making alternative to contemporary globalisation in On Kawara's maps.

3 See "Prize of Testimonies and Reflections on On Kawara", in On Kawara, ep. cit., p.37.
Matter
The materiality of the object is hand-ordinary postcards and corner-shop maps. On Kawara used tourist postcards to announce his daily awakening: I Got Up. He made lists of his meetings with people. I Met. He read and clipped items from the newspaper. I Read. (1966-95). He traced his daily journeys onto photocopied local maps. I Went. All these series of works are deeply interrelated. However, to discuss the concept of movement in his work, I will focus on I Went. In this body of work, On Kawara used a red ballpoint pen to indicate the origin, direction and destination of travel. A red dot marks the location where he began, on days when he stayed at home, it is the sole mark on the map. The method by which each map is marked and the size at which it is cropped are consistent. On Kawara stamped each map with the date.

Those gestures invite reflection and speculation on the relationship between a functional purpose and a metaphysical proposition. How to approach this radiantly tractable? In art criticism there are three commonplace roles—promoter, detective and surveyor—that each lead in a different direction. For instance, it is tempting to adopt a simple inversion of the rule that technical effort plus material cost equals surplus value, and to celebrate the value of On Kawara’s minimal gesture by claiming that the austerity of his execution is proportionate to the depth of symbolic meaning. Similarly, we can begin an investigation into the appearance of a seemingly ordinary surface in order to unveil the myriad possibilities hidden beneath it. Finally, there is the challenge of connecting the iconic symbol to its cultural context. I will suggest another path, one that oscillates between recalling details of On Kawara’s work and reflecting on ideas that he held in common with other philosophers and thinkers of his time. I will begin with a contemplation of the marks made on the maps. What are they doing? Then I will ask: Where are they pointing? This dual mode of attention zooms in on the matter at hand, and zooms out to show the open horizon. Throughout On Kawara’s practice there is both a discrete object that refers to a specific incident, and the acknowledgement of wider spheres of possibility. Hence, an approach that starts by contemplating the abstract relation of the part to the whole is justified on two grounds.

First, there is the paradox of presence. The work is constituted in and presents a response to motion. However, it announces its own form by means of a cut, an inscription, a suspension; and, through this sequence of activity, it furnishes a shape. It is about motion, but it creates meaning through a material form and a symbolic gesture. Each part is assembled to fit into, or rather, intimate, a near-infinite order, and to point to an overarching structure. Second, there is the enigma of embodiment. All his works are announced in the first person and yet the body of the artist is nowhere to be seen in all his monographs and catalogues there is no single interview or portrait. The works remain in symbolically register his material tracks in this world. They provide precise records of the time he got up, the places he went, the people he met, as well as the date and language in which this occurred. But these are only incidental details—we know nothing of what motivated his movements or their emotional impact. The formal and metaphysical paradoxes are also evident in the anecdotal accounts of On Kawara’s outlook and disposition. While he was nowhere to be seen during art events, the postcards and telegrams that he sent were mostly to critics and curators. He frequently met with fellow artists. Dan Graham described On Kawara not as a hermit, but as an engaging friend with an encyclopaedic knowledge and an enchanting belief in “world culture”. On Kawara’s hope for institutions like the United Nations was underscored by his preference for using “UN stamps and the UN Post Office.” This worldly sense of identity stands in stark contrast to his incessant engagement with the material production of interpersonal systems of communications.

Motion
When invited to select an essay to accompany his 2002 Phaidon monograph, On Kawara chose an article by the art historian Stuart A. Hameroff and the renowned physicist Roger Penrose that explores the human capacity for creativity and the relationship between consciousness and the cosmos. The authors adopt Alfred North Whitehead’s proposition that the universe is

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On Kawara, I Got Up, 1966-95, standard ink on postcards, dimensions variable, detail. © On Kawara, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

5 See "Techniques in Images and Reflections on On Kawara", in On Kawara, op. cit., 2002, p. 8. Seong-jin Kim has recalled some occasions in which On Kawara agreed to an interview, but when the interviewers arrived at the meeting place "all they found was a cigarette unsmoking in an ashtray". Ibid., p. 86, pp. 24-25.
On Kavara, I Road, 1966-95, newspaper paste-up so paper
with ink additions, 27.9 x 21.5 cm
detail, Q and
courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation, New York

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or a form of monumentalism, a term developed by Kosuth. Aksels during his editorialship of the left-wing journal Argument from 1958 to 1962, and now more widely known through the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. At the time, Arguments was not only responding to the global spread of social processes, ethical issues and economic structures, but also proposing to rethink the link between the world and creativity.6 Aksels's conception of monumentalism prefaced the critiques of globalisation that, in the Anglophone world, only began to come to the surface in the late 1990s. Aksels and the contributors to Arguments claimed that the phenomenon of globalisation was prefigured by an imaginary process of 'becoming worldly'.7 The economic structure could only happen because it had already occurred in the mind. The process of worldliness announced itself primarily as a form of play, a relation with others.8

In the same year that Aksels joined Arguments, Roger Callois published his highly influential book on the significance of play in human consciousness and creativity.9 Callois claimed that games should not be dismissed as a mere transactive phase in a child's development; rather, they constitute the fundamental activity through which imagination occurs. He went on to argue that play was the vital tool for the conceptual mapping of our sense of being in the world. Much later, Jacques Derrida was to pick up this thread that passes from Aksels and Callois and that he would emphatically seize in 1967: 'This is the game of the world that must be first thought.'10

It may also come as a wonderful non-surprise that On Kawara financed his travels from his winnings in the game of mail painting. Like Marcel Duchamp, he loved chess and was captivated by madmen.11 Callois and Aksels's sociological and philosophical observations on games can also shed light on On Kawara's artological methodological tendencies, which have often been described as Sartrean for its blunt acceptance of fate combined with the joyful will to start again. Similarly, Callois noted that games encourage both an impulsive and improvisational form of play that he defined as poietic and a more inquisitorial and skilled form of ingenuity that he termed ludic. However, he also stressed that the game, the sense of the perpetual opening of the participators overways a passing outcome: 'At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued.'12 In each game, and in each day, there is enough, 'one day contains everything.'13

On Kawara's Date Paintings were also executed within the confines of a set of rules that resemble a game: each painting had to be finished on the day that it was begun and those that were not completed by midnight had to be destroyed. It is also of the currency of each painting was confined to a temporal and spatial boundary. In a game, the relationship between place and people is sustained through a reciprocal tension. This relational consciousness has profound affinities with the sensibility articulated by On Kawara. In both instances, we see a positioning that is neither external to the physical condition nor utterly immersed in the world; spatial temporal relations are delicately poised between the inside and the outside. The near infinite systems developed by On Kawara can thus find resavon with Aksels's claim that 'the human is the great paranoiac of the play of the world, yet the human is not only the player, but is equally the "supplied", the playing.'14


10 On Kavara moved back and forth between Paris and New York between 1962 and 1964, and I wonder if at some point he was involved in the Arguments from the Bohemian Naval-Militar.


13 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatics (1967), trans. Maya Skraczyk, Sunflower University Press, 1994, p.55. This is a reference to Balzac's novel to provide playful literature: Balzac, "Le Père Goriot", 1835, Balzac's moral is that a parasite on the world, the protagonist is as a "false player" of a game. (It is a "false" to Emil Bodo, "The History of Thought.

14 On Kawara, "Once a Traveler" in the last works, the difference to the last works of Kawara as a "false player" of a game. (It is a "false" to Emil Bodo, "The History of Thought.

15 On Kawara, "Once a Traveler" in the last works, the difference to the last works of Kawara as a "false player" of a game. (It is a "false" to Emil Bodo, "The History of Thought.

As Jeffrey Weiss notes, On Kawara’s project utilized simple communication systems that operated within a frame of repetition. The paintings, lists and maps were always assembled as variable elements that could be “combined and recombined in a play of contingency and purpose.” From this perspective, Weiss is right to conclude that On Kawara “uses the game to frame the world.” In this combination of openness to possibility and the attention focusing on the rules of the game, there is another paradox revealed. Through the function of the game, we witness not the closed mechanism for regulating outcomes, but a process of attainment that sharpens the interplay between the body and mind. As we zoom in on a game, we can see how it opens a space that functions as an eraser, a space of exemption from the everyday. However, Weiss also observes that On Kawara’s methodology functions like a triple hells, for it applies ordering systems to a subjective epistemology that means to be existential in scope. From this perspective, the closed ritual of the game zooms out to a wider sphere. If we recollect earlier claim that the map functions as a mirror to capture consciousness and common, then the function of the ritual is also a mimetic act of bringing forth the meaning of the cosmos in the world making activity of art.

The experience of this kind of player in a world stands in stark contrast to existence on a flat disc. In a globalised world there is no need for maps. Each step will simply take you from one familiar place to the next. All signs are obvious. But in the worldling of mondialisation, maps have multiple functions; they are mnemonics, but they are also provisional, iterative and relational. One map is always dependent on another. No map is complete in itself. In this world, difference is inevitable. There is no meta-world that can accommodate all worlds. In the flow and rub of different ideas, things and peoples, new worlds are forever in production. The worldling of mondialisation in this an abstraction; it operates in the imagination. However, it is also materialised in the parallèle process of social interaction and is defined in the perpetual encounter with cultural difference. In the spirit of this reciprocal relationship between the human activity of creativity and the world as a cosmos, Nancy asks: “What is the world as the product of human beings, and what is the human being insofar as it is in the world and as it needs this world?” The world of mondialisation exists in creation. The process and the products of creation are thus interconnected with the imaginary construction of a cosmos.

Meaning
A cosmos is usually understood as a synonym for the universe. In Ancient Greece, it had a more layered range of meanings. It referred to an intermediate zone between the earth and the unbounded universe; it was a circumambient sphere that was also the source of the divine and creativity. However, cosmos was also a term used to denote the whole of humanity and, perhaps most relevant for our purpose, it articulated the activity of organizing time and space so that it was both attractive to the other and meaningful for the self. Cosmos was both a wider concept for belonging and a specific activity for making order out of chaos. When Penelope rearranges the bedroom to receive her husband, and check that it is her Odyssey that has come home, Homer tells us that she is making a cosmos. The art of cosmos is not just aesthetic, in the modern sense of decoration, but a mode of placing one’s body in the world so that it is attuned to the harmonics of motion in time and space. Hence, we can claim that the cosmos is produced in the encounter with the other. It exists in the journey and all the relations that are formed through motion. The matrix of these relations creates a cluster of habitation. Cosmos in the community that forms through motion and communication, the coexistence with others and the effort to create an order that can hold you together.

Through this wide and active concept of cosmos, I want to note the attention that On Kawara gives to motion while at the same time seeking to punctuate this flow through the iteration of temporal and spatial records. On Kawara’s work assumes both the modest quality of the incident as a minor occurrence and its critical form as a rupture that marks the emergence of novelty; it combines an instantaneous engagement with the everyday and an exploration of this here in the world. The paintings and maps are documents, but not as registers or personal aids for memory. For On Kawara, such document is a suspension of the normal flow of time and an abstraction that symbolically presents the spatio temporal dimensions of the incident.

Yet, from what position do we start to frame the meaning of the incident? I have already discarded either cultural contextualisation or formalist analysis. I will now zoom in on some biographical comment, and then zoom out towards the widest possible framework. In one of his rare confessions, On Kawara declared that he collected dates. Each date is unique and together there are many, however, even within their uniqueness, they also point to the infinite. The paradoxical relationship between singularity and unity catapults us to the vast concept of creation.

According to the early work of Cornelius Castriodias, and again in the recent writings of Nancy, the key feature of creation is the condition of its emergence, which they both evoke through the religious concept of ex stihle, Nancy writes: “In creation, a growth grows from nothing and this thing takes care of itself, cultivates its growth.” The link between art as a world-making activity and the cosmos of creation is further entwined in this absorbing passage, in which Nancy evokes art as the most explicit form of world-making activity.

Worldhood ... is the form of forms that itself demands to be created, that is not only produced in the absence of any given, but held infinitely beyond any possible given: in a sense, then, in is never inscribed in a representation, and nonetheless always at work and in circulation in the forms that are being invented.

The incessant production of worldhood in art is both mysterious in that its appearance is barely perceptible in the world, and hard in that it is through this world that the appearance of art is recognisable. It is only in the taking place of creation that the distinct being of art emerges.

In this sense, creation is understood as the "originary extention of what does not exist in itself". Nancy thereby posulates that being and artwork are not immanent within a process, or even the result of a subject’s action, but dependent on a prior opening of the world to the space of time.

On Kawara’s incessant announcements, recordings and especially the traces he left on maps forebode a flattened globe. Yet his rejection of globalisation is not a withdrawal from the world but an affirmation of worldly practice as a worldly activity, or a form of mondialisation.

19. Ibid., p. 59.
20. Ibid., p. 55.

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The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars... Thus each act of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded... complete in meaning... in sense... and complete for the senses... rounded because the soul rests within itself even while it acts... rounded because its action separates itself from it and, having become itself, finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference around itself.\textsuperscript{28}

Lukács contrasted this classical world with the world in which, as Friedrich Hölderlin claimed, the Gods have vanished. Lukács described our world as shaped by a "second nature" where, instead of fixed laws, there is "the embodiment of recognised but senseless necessities."\textsuperscript{29} This fall from certitudes into the boundless and exilic state is a familiar modernist trope. It is commonplace to read Lukács's early cosmic pessimism as a transitional phase in his movement from Kant to Hegel, or as the apprenticeship period prior to his embrace of Marx in the wake of the Russian Revolution. However, Lukács was not offering a lament over the death of a divinely ordered universe; rather, he provided an account of the transition from a human activity that attributed the universe with a divine order to another that now recognizes nature as meaningless. In this not a double movement, one that suspends a belief in the divine and then diverts responsibility back to the artist to create a form that holds an order for totality? Lukács's point on creation in the necessarily alienated era of second nature thus not only highlights the departure from the idealized Greek era in which meaning was immaterial to life itself, but also underlines the responsibility of the artist to find meaning by creating a new integration of parts.

The challenge to find creative affirmation in the context of pervasive alienation is at the core of On Kawara's practice. His production of serial works could be seen as an effort that both beckons the infinite and conceals finitude: nothing in art is equal to eternity. The object must face and allow space for its own degradation and alienation. What sort of perspective comes from this unrestricted hospitality? On one level, the project that On Kawara embarked upon embraced the multitude of forces and events that pervaded his existence. However, in the construction of a system of representation he also developed a grounded perspective. The gaze in On Kawara's work is routinely concentrated on the contours of the incident: in withdrawing attention from all that surrounds the incidental, he disavows the all-pervasive infinity. Hence, there is no view of the world, but there is the incessant production of world views. In each instance, there is one view after the other of the world. Such incessant production of world views presents the world as a process: a perpetual act of becoming. In each date painting, with every list of people he met and on all the maps of the journeys that he undertook, the paradox between alienation and transformation remains. The perspective is directed toward seizing the moment and it is also dissolved in the evocation of a horizon of infinite play.

In conclusion, I would like to note the relative silence that On Kawara maintained about the meaning of his work. His reticence should not be confused with either a reclusive version of intersubjectivity or a secret promotion of vitalism. All that we can confidently conclude from On Kawara's silence is that he eliminated pauses. He did not frame his work by stating either the ideological or affective circumstances of his being, which suggests that he thought the play of meaning must be seen elsewhere. I have argued that it is best witnessed from the dual perspective of both zooming in on eventos time and zooming out to hold cosmic boundlessnesses. The paradox of this combination stretches on along the unbearable extremes of contemporary culture. It is On Kawara's achievement that the prismatic document and the contemplative meditation are held together side by side, that one is interwoven with the other. It is in the space between cool contemplation and routine reiteration that On Kawara produced a form that is both of his time and space, and an opening of time space.


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 82.