

On Kawara's Pure Consciousness, or Many Worlds (and) Interpretation

0. Introduction

Hi everybody. My Name is Yuki Okumura. I am a Japanese artist, translator, and writer, born in 1978, who lives and works in Tokyo. Currently I am participating in a residency program in Basel, Switzerland. I am very happy to have this opportunity here at Dia: Chelsea, NY, to talk about the work of On Kawara from my artistic perspective, as part of the foundation's renowned lecture series Artists on Artists.

I once wrote a critical essay about the work of Kawara. My intention was not locating his work in the context of conceptual art, or the history of contemporary art. Rather, I tried to rediscover his work from the perspective of what it is to live as a human being. From such a perspective, it built a bridge between his early works made in 50s and his practice after he settled in NY in 1965 until now.

Today's talk has been developed from THAT essay, but re-designed to offer you a different experience, not through written letters but through my own voice and presence. I hope this will provide you with a profound insight into his marvelous practice.

1. Background

I will begin by talking about things in common for any human beings, the basic physical conditions we all share. In order to do so, I will use the first person singular "I" as the subject, because there is no other way to talk about it than taking myself as an example.

I am confined in THIS physical body. I am chained to it. Sometimes I feel it is strange that this body always follows me. It's more like it keeps haunting me. I mean, there are times when I forget about the presence of my body, such as when I sit back in a seat for movies or travels. For example, this time, I came to NY from Basel by airplane. Its velocity was of course incredibly high, but this body was with me all the way, even though at times I did not feel its presence.

There are also times when I am so much aware of the presence of my body, for example when I suffer from real pains. If I am stabbed, shot, or having a serious cancer, I am sure I will roll around on the floor, screaming and crying, banging my head against the wall, and so on, trying to cut down the connection between my sensation and my body. But I know this effort will be in vain. No matter how hard I move my arms and legs, no matter how far I get, or no matter how fast I run or fly, my sensation and my body are tightly connected.

In this sense, my body is like a closed room with no windows and exits. I am not allowed to leak out through the wall, either. There is no escape from it. There's no outside, only inside.

Also, I am not allowed to have more than one body. It is THIS SINGLE BODY, not any other,

to which I am connected. I cannot have multiple bodies. Even though I feel bored and tired with this body, I cannot exchange my body with someone else's. The skin clearly separates self and others.

2. Space and Body

So, how about my body itself that confines me? Is it free from any confinement? Of course not. My body is confined in space-time. Let's discuss SPACE first. It confines my body in a double sense. First of all, it simply confines my body in itself. My body is made of matter, which, by definition, is something that occupies space. I cannot imagine any matter that exists somewhere not space. So, I think it can be said that it is nothing but space that allows my body to exist in this world. As long as you are human, there is no escape from space. There's no outside, only inside.

Secondly, space confines my body to a SINGLE position that is called here. I can never be "there," because when I think I reach "there," it is already "here." When I was small, this made me wonder a lot, but it is very simple. The position called here is where my body is located. Anywhere I go, it becomes "here." So, by definition, I can only be here all the time. There is always only one "here", because I have only one body.

Furthermore, space is not only a prison and a chain, but also an executioner. Because in ultimate cases, space gets brutal enough to physically DESTROY my body. I have never experienced such a situation, but I sometimes sense such potential brutality of space instinctively. What I am talking about is black holes. According to relativity theory, space has a nature to curve around mass, which IS gravity. When curvature of space gets to the breaking point, a black hole is formed. I was wondering what would happen if I fell into a black hole? The study says that my body will be completely torn apart, because of the huge gaps between the gravitational pull to my head, that to my stomach, and that to my feet.

However, such ultimate violence of space must be, from another perspective, what can liberate my body from the confinement to "here." Because, being cut into numerous parts, my body is not single anymore. I can finally occupy multiple positions. I am here with my head, I am there with my right arm, I am over there with my left leg, and so on. I am alone, but I am many. I am in the state of SUPERPOSITION then.

Of course, this moment of liberation does NOT last long. Because they say that at the core of a black hole, there is so-called gravitational singularity, which has infinite density. Sadly, it will absorb all my body parts.

3. Time and Body

Let's move on to another closed room that imprisons my body, which is TIME. First of all, there is no doubt that time is a condition for my body to live. Living is a continuous act, a sequence of actions, which needs the flow of time as its background. I cannot imagine any

human body living out of time. In this sense, it can be said that it is time that lets my body alive, while it is space that lets my body exist. As long as I am human, there is no escape from time. There's no outside, only inside.

Secondly, time confines my body to a certain single point that is called "now." When I was small, this also makes me wonder. Why can't I experience the future or the past? Now I can answer to this question very simply. It's because "now" is defined as the moment that my body directly experiences. The future is always "now" when it comes, and "now" always becomes past when it's gone. My body cannot live in the future or the past, it is just that my consciousness can imagine them.

Furthermore, time is not only a prison and a chain, but also an executioner, just like space. Because time makes my body age. I am feeling my body is getting older and older year by year. Time makes my body weaker and weaker. Little by little, it is killing me. I know there will be the moment when my body will cease its activities. Time is irreversible, so once I die, it will be impossible for me to come back to life anymore.

However, such ultimate violence of time is, from another perspective, what can liberate my body from the confinement to "now." Just like how my body can be liberated from "here" by its fragmentation, the confinement to "now" is cancelled by the DEATH of my body. Because, if I am dead, there is no "now," which, by definition, is the moment that MY BODY lives. However, this liberation will fail, because when my body is liberated from "now" by death, my body itself is not active anymore. Thus, I cannot experience the liberation.

So, the question is, How can I get liberated from the confinement to "here" and "now," while my body remains active and in a good shape, without being fragmented or without being totally dead? The person who can give the answer is no one but On Kawara. Now, finally, we are ready to study him.

4. Pure Consciousness and Duality of Life and Death

When Kawara was still in Japan, in the 50's, his subject matter was human being in general. The most famous work around this period is the series of small pencil drawings titled Bathroom. In each of the drawings, naked human bodies are dismembered into parts, and scatter around the bathroom whose walls, ceiling, and floor are all distorted and covered by grid-shaped tiles. It reminds me of how space is illustrated to describe gravity, in other words space curvature, in a text book of science, where three dimensional space is reduced to a two dimensional fabric which has a similar grid-shaped pattern. Thus, I cannot help thinking that the drawings depict the brutal yet liberating moment inside a black hole, in an incredibly realistic way. These fragmented figures represent all of us, all of human beings that are destined to be imprisoned in space, twisted and then chopped up by gravity, dreaming about escaping from it.

Since he settled in NY in 1965, Kawara seemed to have changed his methodology. He started to embody such a brutal and liberated phenomenon by himself, not illustrating it with figurative images. He started to enact what I would call a "absent performance," which

he is still performing today.

Since he settled in NY, he has NEVER appeared in public until today, for almost 50 years. He has been totally ABSENT even at his own exhibition openings. He has rejected all interviews and any form of video or sound recordings. His body has been out of our sight, out of our OBSERVATION. He has shut himself in a sort of CLOSED ROOM into which our direct perception cannot reach.

What is physically available to us instead, is only his WORK such as Today series that is composed of so-called date paintings whose number has been growing with time. As you know, each date painting depicts the date when Kawara painted it. There is no additional image on the canvas. Therefore, what each date painting first of all informs us, is that the artist was certainly in a state of activity, or put simply he was certainly alive, on the very day the painting records.

Seen by us, his work resembles a shining star in the night sky, or a movie star in films. A star that we see in the present is in fact located hundreds of thousands of light years away. We see its twinkle now, but it comes from the past. Also, films show movie stars acting in the past. Simply speaking, they are not LIVE. They are like ghosts from the past. The light and image are their mediums. The important thing is that we have no idea whether the star or the actor itself is alive or dead now.

The same goes for Kawara. We have no way of knowing if he was still alive or already dead on the dates not recorded in Today series. Of course, for example, if there was no work in the series for January 1st, 2012, but there was one for January 2nd, 2012, we could affirm that on January 1st, he was alive. Because death is an irreversible event, it is impossible he was dead on January 1st and alive on January 2nd in the same year.

But what about a case in which later dates have not appeared? Since the day when his latest work was created, which is as far as I know February 8, 2012, until today, which is May 14, 2012, has he been alive?

The answer is, we don't know. Because we have no direct access to his body. It is possible he is living and possible he is not. Seen from us, the two possibilities are in the state of superposition. He is in a dual state of being alive AND dead at once. As I said, death would liberate my body from the confinement to "now," but it would also cease my existence, which is meaningless. Thus the duality of life and death should be the ideal. It liberates my body from "now" while my body would remain its physical presence.

Or, you may think of it in another way. The fact that his body is invisible to us, also means that his body is virtually IMMATERIAL in our subjective reality. He has no body. He exists only as a PURE CONSCIOUSNESS, so to speak, pure in the sense that it is not accompanied by a physical body.

Even if my body is imprisoned to "here" and "now," my consciousness, more precisely its intentionality, is free from such confinement. Even though I am a prisoner, and so my body is shut in the jail, I can still imagine flying in the sky, going back to a bright day in my memory, and so on.

In this light, I think it is clear that his work is his MEDIUM, both in the artistic sense and the spiritual sense. He sort of possesses his work. With his work, we perceive his virtual presence, through the date as an evidence of his life, and through the brushstroke as a trace of his actions. His body is literally surrogated by his work. This means that he virtually exists at multiple positions at once, every place where his work is exhibited. He is in that gallery, in that museum, in that art center, and so on, all at once, across the globe.

5. Kawara and Quantum Physics.

So, let's go back to the question. How can I get liberated from the confinement to "here" and "now," while my body remains as it is? Studying Kawara's practice, the answer is to make myself invisible and immaterial, and provide works that can function as a substitute of my body. However, there is a single term to wrap up his practice. Which is quantum. Kawara has made himself quantum.

Let's check out the basics of quantum physics, by taking an ELECTRON as an example. When NOT OBSERVED, an electron seems like formless, like a wave or a cloud. It is considered that a SINGLE electron is located at all its possible positions at once. While it is very difficult for us to imagine based on our everyday perception, those different situations are in the state of superposition. And then, when an observer tries to observe and detect it, it turns into a single, solid particle, physicalized at one of the possible positions. This whole thing is called Wave-particle duality, which is considered to be the essential nature of matter.

In order to grasp how strange quantum-scale objects behave, Austrian physician Erwin Schrödinger brought up a thought experiment, now known as Schrödinger's Cat. In this setting, a cat is shut in a closed room with a special device that emits poison gas triggered by detection of a certain radioactive particle. The behavior of this particle is according to the quantum randomness. As a result, the cat remains alive AND dead simultaneously, not alive OR dead. The duality remains until the door is opened by outside observers.

This resembles a black box. You get a wrapped box as a gift from your lover or family or friend. You never know what is inside unless you open it. It can be a cake, chocolate, watch, books. These possibilities are superposed in the sealed space. When you open it, meaning when you observe it, one possibility turns into a reality.

Shut in a black box, out of our sight, Kawara is also located at multiple positions at once, and is alive and dead at once. He is an electron and he is the unfortunate cat, free from the confinement to "here" and "now."

However, there is a problem. In early February this year, I met On Kawara in persons. He sort of liked my essay and put the English translation in his latest book that was published in conjunction with his exhibition in NY. So I came to NY from Tokyo, to see the show, and he invited me to tea in his house.

There, I met him, meaning I observed him. I opened the door of his house, which literally means I opened his black box in a conceptual sense. I said hello, he said welcome. We shook hands. This made his superposition collapse into a certain state, within my subjective reality. He was not PURE CONSCIOUSNESS anymore. He physicalized and visualized to me, he transformed from a wave to a particle. I now know how his face looks like, how his hand feels like, and how his voice sounds like.

So, becoming quantum does not seem to be safe enough to keep my body liberated, because after all, this liberation is not defined as part of objective reality, but defined as part of subjective reality.

This raises a new question. So, in the objective reality, is it impossible for anyone to get liberated from "here" and "now"? Is liberation only possible when one is shut in a CLOSED ROOM where outside observers cannot reach? This is also what quantum physicians were wondering about.

6. Many Worlds Interpretation

In order to explain the Wave-particle duality logically, several ideas have been proposed. One of the most logical ones is the so-called Many Worlds Interpretation. It claims that every time an event occurs, such as an electron is detected, the world branches into parallel worlds.

In the microscopic world, subatomic objects, such as an electron, is detected at one position when observed, although there were many other possible positions it can be found. The position of the particle seems to have been determined randomly, without any logical reason. This randomness, however, is not the case, according to this interpretation. It seems random, but in fact, all the possible positions HAVE BEEN realized. It is just that each position has been realized in a different world. It is not random, it is just relative. You find yourself one of these worlds.

Indeed, the difference between newly-born parallel worlds is super tiny. However, I believe it should make a huge difference over time. Due to the tiny difference millions of years ago, there should be infinite number of totally different worlds now that are going in parallel.

Let me speak simply. In this world, my body is here. But there are other worlds in which my body is there, over there, in that city, on that mountain, or on the Moon, Mars, and so on. I am alive, I am dead, I was not born. And, conversely, those who are dead by accidents in this world are definitely still alive in some of the other worlds. The same goes for everything, including this lecture itself.

According to the Many Worlds Interpretation, this is the objective reality. In fact, this theory revolves all the Quantum mechanical paradoxes, including Schrodinger's Cat. Thus, as a logical conclusion, the answer to the question I raised will be that the liberation is POSSIBLE in the objective reality. Moreover, in fact, it means that from the very beginning, all of us have NEVER been confined to "here" and "now" if you consider all the possible worlds as a whole. We have been already liberated.

Nevertheless, the Many Worlds does not liberate us from space and time themselves. These worlds are always in the state of superposition, which is made possible due to sharing the same space and time as their common platform. These worlds are confined in space and time. Because of this, we are liberated from "here" and "now."

Such a reality, however, may be quite difficult for us to feel REAL. Because, after all, we recognize only this world, nowhere else. That's why Kawara is devoting his whole life to make his body immaterial and transform himself into a pure consciousness, so that the whole structure of many worlds are reduced to fit into this world, as if three dimensional space is reduced to a two dimensional fabric to illustrate how space curves. That is how he makes us feel it real, while at the same time revealing the cruel and tragic fate of all of us human beings, in a truly precise manner. They are two sides of the same coin.

In conclusion, the world-view that Kawara presents suggests that each of us is like On Kawara. We are all waves spreading and vibrating across the many worlds. We are all PURE CONSCIOUSNESS that possess many different bodies across the many worlds. In the 50s, when Kawara was still working in Japan, it was the fictional naked figures that we identified ourselves with. Because these figures represented human beings in general. And then, since 1965 when he settled in NY, until today, it has been On Kawara himself that we identify ourselves with. He is like an empty vessel into which any of us can insert ourselves. This, I think, is the essence of his "absent performance."

Now that I met him, he is not pure consciousness anymore, at least in this world. He is confined in a physical body that is fragile defined by space and transient defined by time, just like our bodies. Sooner or later, he will die. He will be no longer able to walk on the street, go to places, meet people, read books, send telegrams, get up in the morning, and paint paintings. Nevertheless, I don't think he will say goodbye to us. I am sure he will keep silent and absent, fading into the infinite space and time.

This is how I interpret Kawara's "absent performance." I hope it's been making sense to you to some degree.

By the way, in fact, in this lecture, I was supposed to talk about my own work, too, but instead of describing it concretely, I tried to "perform" it with my body. I mean, I think this lecture itself is my work, in that my practice¹ is about how interpretation can create alternate reality. Furthermore, in fact, this lecture will be the material for my performance piece which will be shown at the National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, on August 28, this year. If you are interested in what I do as an artist, please come to Tokyo, and check it out.

I hope I will be still alive then.

Thank you for your attendance.