

AFRAID ATLAS



Bethlehem

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Since his death c. A.D. 33, countless millions have been taught to believe that Jesus Christ was born on 25 December Zero B.C. in Bethlehem. In that town, a church has been built over the X-marks-the-spot assumed to be the actual birthplace, the manger in the stable. Strangely, it is now a subterranean place, a grotto in a crypt, a pilgrimage destination that compels believers to kneel and count blessings, a place of spiritual intensity that inspires all kinds of weird behaviour. Touristic tendencies mix with a kind of self-induced autism whereby young priests pray fervently, oblivious to others in crowds milling around, also feeling the need to be there. Upstairs, candles and postcards are for sale, forcing the correspondence between religious relics and souvenirs.

On 4 January 1966, 1,965 years and 10 days after Christ is supposed to have been born, On Kawara started his *Today* series, an ongoing work comprising, to date, thousands of *Date Paintings*. They are paintings that are essentially inscriptions of the date of the day on which they were made – relics, souvenirs of a day that the artist lived through. White, standard, *sans serif* combinations of letters from the Roman alphabet and Arabic numerals – i.e. modern, Western-style – they comprise stark statements of units of time in the Christian calendar. This is a significant choice for a Japanese artist, brought up in the light of Shinto, Buddhist and Christian ideologies, whose formative years were lived through World War II.

On Kawara began *Date Paintings* shortly after arriving in New York, the welcoming city of the world power that dropped its atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan? (Mexico? Paris?) The United States? The birthday of Christ? Thanksgiving? The birthday of the Emperor? New Year? Any place, any time... Post-war certainties were clearly arbitrary, symptoms of

an all-too-human necessity, to an artist who is as intelligent as he is sensitive. The Christian calendar? Why not?

On 17 September 1998, seven *Date Paintings*, 1-7 January 1997, were installed in a kindergarten in Sydney's inner city, the day before the opening of the 11th Biennale of Sydney. This was the first manifestation of 'Pure Consciousness', an exhibition devised by the artist for children who are about six years old, beginning to learn to read and count, finding out that there are seven days in a week, that Tuesday follows Monday, Wednesday Thursday, etc. A wider world is being revealed to them. They are seeing countless things for the first time, with 'pure consciousness', a condition that On Kawara suggests as both sufficient and necessary for personal fulfilment. With the fresh pairs of eyes of the children involved, his paintings are apprehended simply, profoundly, in a particular kind of classroom; not to be used as 'artistic' teaching aids, but there to co-exist with young people, who live happily without a definition of art.

Since Sydney, the seven *Date Paintings*, in the same consecutive sequence, have been installed in kindergartens all over the world, from Istanbul to the Ivory Coast, from the Amazon to Avignon, from Shanghai to Toronto, from London to Lund. Clearly, the artist's proposition is as international as it is practically modest, reflecting his own identity as a peripatetic, unassuming citizen of the world.

On Kawara was a schoolboy, an occupant of classrooms, when the Japanese holocaust occurred. He describes a radical scepticism that then coloured his everyday life, whereby he answered "I don't understand" to every question his teachers asked. Later, after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 and the American occupation, he started travelling globally, looking for an authentic way to express himself. He eventually found it in the cave paintings of Altamira, Spain, in 1963. The *Date Paintings* are a direct response to the beautiful pictures On Kawara saw on the walls of those prehistoric 'rooms', illuminations in darkness, pictures made long before anyone had learnt how to write and much longer before anyone had formulated even the vaguest definition of art.

Now, here we are in the kindergarten of Dar Al-Kalima College, Bethlehem, with On Kawara's *Date Paintings* hung on a wall that also provides the backdrop for good, clear didactic charts – numbers one to ten, alphabets, etc. – and a wide range of stationery, pencils, crayons, glue, scissors, paper, cards, filling shelves and cupboards. There is modelling clay and other art class material. Cheerful mobiles, assemblages made by the children who occupy this room every day, hang from the ceiling above a configuration of chairs and tables, organised into groups that suggest friendliness. This is a well-organised classroom, not the abject interior one might have expected to find somewhere in Palestine, resembling scenes broadcast on TV news.

The Dar Al-Kalima kindergarten is affiliated with the International Cultural Centre in Bethlehem, sponsored by the Lutheran church. There we had the privilege to meet Senior Pastor Mitri Raheb who, with good humour, suggested that even God had had enough of religion in Palestine/Israel. His argument essentially is that the Palestinians are engaged in a long war – much more than a battle – and that, for each Palestinian, an entire life of fighting simply

is not fair. There must be places of refuge, where one can enjoy and/or imagine a peaceful, civilised existence as something normal. Otherwise, eventually, all hope will be lost.

Now, here we are again in this kindergarten, this time with the children. They are very welcoming, funny, as they try out their English. Hello. "Hello". In the playground, they are amused by our attempts to kick their footballs back into their games. They are confident-shy, like all kids of their age all over the world. They giggle together, hands over mouths, as they observe the behaviour of these aliens that have landed in their school. They couldn't be more curious and engaging. On the first evening after the *Date Paintings* were installed, we attended a meeting in the kindergarten with parents and children where all sorts of ideas about art and life were tested. It was one of the most stimulating symposiums that ever happened around an art event. Why were we here? Why On Kawara? Hiroshima/Palestine? And, oh yes, that's right, Jesus – the ultimate peacemaker – was born in Bethlehem...

We spent that night in Ramallah, having negotiated the Israeli check points that skirt around Jerusalem. The swagger of the young, 20-something Israeli soldiers with their machine guns, their enjoyment of power, their games of stop-and-search, could not have been more tedious, more insulting. In between the check points, we caught glimpses of the new wall, the wall that is choking the life out of Bethlehem, the wall that is separating innocent people from land that is rightfully theirs, the wall that is essentially counterproductive. It is a structure that continually reminds Palestinians from the occupied territories that they cannot move between their towns without Israeli permission, without the humiliating process of asking an aggressor – and one who has America's warm support – for a basic human right. Of all the places in the world destined to receive On Kawara's 'Pure Consciousness', this one could not be more poignant.