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## **PARTICIPATION IN THE PRESENT AND THE SPACING OF TIME: ON KAWARA, NANCY, LEVINAS\***

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the close examination of the notions of presence, participation, and time in the conceptual art of On Kawara, in which the rhetorical figure of art works through the spacing of time. In this way, this conceptual art becomes a symbol of absolute creation – the creation of time and the participation in the eternal present, according to Jean-Luc Nancy's essay: *The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara*. Moreover, On Kawara's paintings explore the theme of being and are structured around Martin Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" in the world, as they convey the sense of being carried along by the events and the impetus of the world. The materiality of the loneliness of the self, which is crucial for this artistic project, is considered with reference to Emmanuel Levinas's thought and Samuel Beckett's *...but the clouds...*

**Keywords:** presence, time, participation, philosophy, conceptual art, On Kawara

Presence, participation, setting forth, setting in space are the main characteristics of a work of art. It exposes its existence here and now. It sets the present moment, it freezes the present moment, it stops for a moment the flow of time, says a contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay *The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara*. In this way, a work of art possesses a piece of time as it possesses a piece of space. It makes it permanent. Nancy emphasizes the meaning of a particular mode of production, exposition, and bringing forth of a work of art, which are the proper states and modes of being attributed to an artwork. Moreover, "what is exposed is placed under the order

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of absolute, immutable, and necessary presence (...) Presence is not a quality or a property of the thing. It is the act through which the thing is brought forth: *prae-est*,"<sup>1</sup> argues Nancy.

The aim of a work of art is free of any other utilization and usage apart from exposition and presentation. What is produced is being, presence, participation. Kant's criteria of art's disinterestedness are therefore fulfilled. The lack of any precise end and application sets a work of art as if outside the cause and effect processes and their limitations. It gives art its value of freedom and shelters it against the passage of time. "The nature of a thing lies in its birth, as the word 'nature' (*natura, nasci*) suggests, and in its unfolding within these relations,"<sup>2</sup> Nancy comments further on the nature of a work of art. According to this approach, a work of art is always a fresh beginning, the first impression, the initial move. In this way, Nancy locates a work of art away from the economic constraints and the values of a commodity circulating in a work-market. Production, sweat and toil, the time-consuming and burdensome dictates of processes that involve *techné* of re-production are juxtaposed with an instantaneous and unexpected exposition. Following J.-F. Lyotard, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson develops a similar approach to a postmodern work of art based on the rhetoric of liberty and baseless energy of the present moment, introducing a term "free-floating intensities,"<sup>3</sup> timeless, impersonal, and weight-less artistic impressions that surpass the passage of time.

Nancy wonders on how it is possible to expose participation in presence, as always different in relation to the past with its inherent permanent quality of novelty inscribed in it: "How can we grasp the pure conjunction of passing and presence, of fleeing and stasis?"<sup>4</sup> he asks. One of the possible answers or meditations on this dilemma has been offered by Bruce Nauman in his famous staircase installation at Olivier Ranch in California (*Untitled 1998-99*). This sculpture is composed of a long sequence of steps of which each differs in scale and measure from the rest. Each step provides a unique experience of the self and the space, a singular awareness of the performance of the body, its temporary adjustments to each position and height, while each movement remains different and exclusive. It is an artwork that makes one experience the present moment in a manner akin to Kant's mathematical sublime. The elevation of

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Nancy, *The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara in: Multiple Arts. The Muses II*, University Press, Stanford 2006, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, London, New York 1991, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Nancy, *The Technique of the Present...*, p. 192.

the overwhelming present instant composed of the infinite number of smaller units, which, however, form a certain completeness of the experience of participation in the present. The sensation of walking in open space through the beautiful landscape of New Mexico hills plays its part in the unity and purity of this aesthetic experience of time. "It is pure time, time shielded from temporality, the space in which pure time opens out and is unexposed. Space does not represent time, like a line that would trace the immobile figure of a mobile process; rather, it opens time, distends it, distends the instant itself so as to set up this unpassing present that time itself is,"<sup>5</sup> Nancy claims in the essay already quoted above. Nauman's staircase is a spacing of time, an extension of space, the simultaneity of the successive character of the experience of walking and contemplating a work of art. This kind of aesthetic suspension of the passage of time can be reached only through participation in art, it does not happen in nature, therefore art seems to be ahead of nature in this case.

In the conceptual art of Nauman and On Kawara, abstract space and gaps open time, the rhetorical figure of art works through the spacing of time. In this way conceptual art becomes a symbol of absolute creation – the creation of time. It creates time outside of the natural flow of events, the poetic time that is not measured by the mechanical tickling of clocks and chronometers, in a curve of space that gives rise to additional spacing of time that belongs to the special, unnatural time of creation, according to Nancy. The numbers of years read aloud in a gallery space during one of On Kawara's performances, are not a reproduction of history, instead they deconstruct history with the rhetoric of the mechanical and the nostalgia for the precision of order. The procedure of reading sets individualized time, rhetorical time that overrides the natural measure, yet exposes the gap between creation and memory. Creation is always directed towards participation in the future, whereas memory is based in the past. Therefore, at the junction of memory and creation, there is a perpetual present of poetry. "Poetry without letters of words, a poetry of cadenced regularity, digit by digit, moving from one line to the next as the number changes, line by line, caesura by caesura, a calculated discretion."<sup>6</sup> This is a pure simulacrum of numbers and time, the poetry of the mechanical and cybernetic age, the poetry of speed and fascination with the narrative of science. In On Kawara's performance *One Million Years* the numbers of the years (past and future) are simultaneously read by a pair of performers (one male and one female). There is no end and no beginning inscribed in this reading, no events of life, no threat of death and no joy of birth, only the rhythm of "the simultaneous eternal

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

present.”<sup>7</sup> This eternal present has some aspects of the sublime rupture, during which one is overwhelmed and drawn into the abyss of eternity. The participation in the eternal present becomes a sublime and solemn timelessness read out in the litany of growing numbers. As Kant claims, the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else appears small and inadequate. Moreover, the sublime, according to Kant, should not be located in the objects of nature, but in only our ideas such as the concept of the passage of time.

Now the sublime in the aesthetical judging of immeasurable whole like *tjos* lies not so much in the greatness of the number [of units], as in the fact that in our progress we ever arrive at yet greater units. To this the systematic division of the universe contributes, which represents every magnitude in nature as small in its turn; and represents our Imagination with its entire freedom from bounds, and with it nature, as a mere nothing in comparison with the Ideas of Reason, if it is sought to furnish a presentation which shall be adequate to them.<sup>8</sup>

The point itself, the point of the intersection of space and time seems empty, which is adequately exposed on the canvases of On Kawara. His paintings are empty, with a tendency toward darker colors, exposing the nuances of shade. This is not merely minimal or geometric art that exposes the blank surface, the tensions of straight lines and angles, the zero-degree of dynamism, or the relation to an empty wall of the gallery. The blank canvasses form the ground for a sign, a representation of the mathematical language of digits, the representation of the concept of the flow of time – the mimesis of the idea of time. On Kawara plays also with our way of signifying time, there is no adequate signification possible, he seems to claim. There is only a gap, a memory gap, a signifying gap between the empty numbers. In language, there are no positive signs, but only differences, says Derrida following the reflection of de Saussure, but the differences here are negligible, which reflects our, misleading at times, perception of the flow of time. The differences between past and future become one, forming perpetual present in On Kawara’s work. In this sense, On Kawara’s paintings represent the *sacrum*, according to Nancy, that is the unrepresentable in itself, if the lack of representation is the icon of the Absolute. “Painting carves out a space – whence the most basic of all sacred gestures, the layout of the *templum*,”<sup>9</sup> Nancy claims. The icon does not represent, rather it stands as a substitute for the participation in the unnamable. It is simplified, minimalist

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. J. H. Bernard, Cosimo, New York 2007, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

and symbolic as it marks the passage to another sensibility, a window with the view to the infinity of relations. An icon is the relation between the perceiver, the visible and the invisible. The rhetoric of this triangular relation (the triptych as in the ecclesiastical art of the Middle Ages) is sacred in itself according to the Christian tradition. Unsurprisingly, On Kawara employs the figure of triptych for example in his Vietnam series, painted in the passionate color of red symbolic of the blood – the bloodshed that it represents as if in an analogy to the sacred sacrifice of Christ's blood. Nancy says: "the sacred operation is a setting aside [*mise à part*], a setting apart [*mise à l'écart*] insofar as this act of participation [*écartment*] is the condition of relation or communication – or, more exactly, insofar as this break [*écart*] is the condition of the infinity of relation."<sup>10</sup> The passage of time, which happens outside our control and will, is the language of the sacred. Therefore, it is the rhetoric of the sublime. The static, the contemplative mode of On Kawara's creation, its inevitable link and mingling with his own existence, his mode of being, also resemble the Byzantine iconic style of creation. On Kawara's painting were inseparably linked to his own intimate style of living. They reflect the passage of his private time, his days, each painting marks one of the days of his life and stands for its quality of uniqueness.

There was no definite separation between his life and his work, his time pervaded the time of his creation. In this sense, his style of painting was not merely a pastime, or an escape from the world, but the essence of his active participation in it. Thus, his painting was sacred as the most essential part of his life activity, the result of his contemplation of being itself and, hence, close to the to the meditative, sacred mechanism of icon painting.

Furthermore, one may assign On Kawara's art to the category of becoming, as it presents the constant tension of timely progression. In this sense, none of his paintings from the series *One Million Years-Past* (1972), *One Million Years-Future* (1982-95) may be perceived as complete in itself. They always exist in relation to the past and future acts of creation in a rhetorical sequence that exhibits its own incompleteness. Therefore, in On Kawara's art the principle of unity is realized only through the existence in many, identity of a work of art finds its fulfillment in differences, in other words, the apparent unity of his creation leads to the diversity of forms, similar yet different at the same time. In this sense his art illustrates the ancient Heraclitus's principle of becoming, with the universal law present and immanent in each of the paintings, of which however none can exist in separation. None of them exhibits the state of completeness, essential to art, therefore his art reveals all states of becoming and nothing that becomes.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, On Kawara's paintings explore the theme of being and are structured around the problem of Martin Heidegger's "thrownness" in the world, as they convey the sense of being carried along by the events and the impetus of the world. To be an artist and to understand human being one has to experience existence and art as being tied to the being-in the world, therefore each painting from On Kawara's *Today* series bears the reflections of the exact location and the language of the place where it was executed. The artist's travels as well as the events of the world, such as the date of landing on the Moon, are also documented and marked by On Kawara by a special, non-standard size of three paintings. The enigmatic quality of his art seems to point to the central theme of Heidegger's philosophy of being and time that is the questions: 'what is the meaning of being' that is depicted in an ingenious way with his fascination with dates and places. Heidegger's views on the role of philosophy and art include his preoccupation with the role of movement in art and thought - art should, according to Heidegger, create and reflect movement through concrete conceptualizations that arise out of one's dealing in the world. This postulate is adequately fulfilled by On Kawara's travelling series.

Finally, On Kawara's pictures may reflect the philosophy of becoming since they present *Dasein* as the being that can question itself about its own being. This question is being repeated with each painting and pronounced with each number announced during performances that, among others, are meant to reveal the radical finitude of one's existence. The idea of death, as the final destination and the end of counting leaves its definitive mark on his creation. The artist creates and counts as long as he exists, expecting the possibility of his own death, as a final testimony of his authentic existence. The paradox of his human condition involves being placed alone before nothing as he is placed in front of his empty canvases to realize that all his projects are just a mark of the inevitable flow of time. He keeps on painting, even though he understands the meaninglessness of his gesture in the face of eternity he attempts to participate in, while forgetting himself. "The 'essence' of *Dasein* lies in its existence,"<sup>11</sup> claims Heidegger, which implies certain self-responsibility, self-control, and openness of man to his existence as possibilities. On Kawara's paintings reveal constant meditation on possibilities, being as possibilities, past and future possibilities, through which being can be further realized and understood. His art is certainly based on a certain idea of truth, exactness, and precision, as well as a relation to Being itself, being open to the openness of Being and may be perceived as an attempt to return to the very foundations of creativity.

Paraphrasing Jaspers, one can say that art as thinking must at all times be original, even in such a very general and universal form as adopted by On

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<sup>11</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Blackwell Publishing, London 2005, p. 42.

Kawara. Every man must reckon or count his existence for himself, progressing along this lonely path that this artist illuminated. The questions of his own being and death were the central preoccupations of On Kawara's life's work as his life-series indicate. His works include for example postcards and telegrams sent to his friends with the simple existential message: "I am still alive" or the exact time he got up that morning, which illustrates how one becomes trapped in habitual ways of acting in the world. All of this conceptual artistic acts are concerned with creating a special personal time and space marked by a certain crisis, which embraces uncertainty that can be resolved only by the in-depth rethinking of one's existence. They exhibit a sense of repression and a form of fixity, because each series of actions-paintings contains its own ending already inscribed in its beginning. The aspect of techné employed in his paintings plays also a significant role. Each of them presents an image of a skillfully and carefully hand-drawn script with an elongated version of Gill Sans, or modernist Futura font.

The same precision applies to his measuring of space. The self in space is always located at the intersection of time and space as in the painting *Location: Latitude 31o25'N, Longitude 8o41*.

Yet, this point does not exist as a probable place of dwelling, notes Nancy, it is a pure calculation, mathematics that has no relation to the real life. Thus, the precision proves pointless, since it marks only a passing existence, a point which is distinguished as separate only through its reference to other points in space. Moreover, the self in space must be viewed as a moving self, as On Kawara registered through his project *Date Paintings* executed in more than 112 different cities worldwide. A point consists of nothing (has no "inside"); it is nothing but a relation to other points, argues Nancy (Nancy 2006, 198). Two points form a line, three give rise to space claims Derrida, therefore, On Kawara's art makes sense only as a sequence, always in relation to past and future locations and dates. The distance is crucial - On Kawara's paintings reflect his constant movement, his artistic travel inquiry that engages at least 112 locations worldwide - it constitutes the time and space dimension of the project, whose meaning is always deferred with reference to future locations, just as the movement of sense between signifiers in the concept of Derrida's *différance*. The quality of incompleteness is its essential feature, inscribed on purpose in the artistic concept that aims to represent the infinity.

In this sense, the final form of any of the paintings is unimportant, they only mark as signposts the ongoing dynamics of their production. As in many performative and conceptual pieces, it is the process of creation itself, which has the signifying capacity rather than its complete final outcome that is the works of art. The artistic process consists of the flow of time that disjoins, separates the paintings, so that, in a sense, art speaks through its Other that

is life itself, which constitutes a peculiar subversion of the mimetic process. It adequately represents that which it does not present – that is the unrepresentable. The negativity inherent in his paintings is pervaded by the sense of openness, close unity with authentic being and its origins. One may claim that his painting punctuate with sharp precise gestures the participation in the essence of being itself. Nancy argues:

The spacing of time, therefore, is a spacing prior to or outside being. More exactly, it is the act of being—not in the sense of the action of a subject but in the sense of an act coextensive or correlative with being itself. So little is it “something,” therefore, some particular thing, that not only is it in neither space nor time, it is neither space nor time; it is, so far as it is, more along the following lines: space and time are the names or the double name—space-time—for the necessarily double nature of what is essentially outside itself (whose essence lies in this outside-itself).<sup>12</sup>

Art of On Kawara is at the same time removed from the world, outside of it and inscribed into it. It actively participates in the continuity of time, encloses the events and time in the artistic actions. The time and spatial gaps that separate the production of each painting are more meaningful than the finished works of art. They express one’s need for a narrative movement constituting a definite artistic statement on the anti-static, and anti-passive status of a work of art as well as the artist’s entrapment in the process of constant escape from the burden of the oppressing self-awareness of the threat of the ubiquitous mode of being. On Kawara seems to point to a new dynamic, live-encircling dimension of plastic arts. The status of visual arts used to be static, deadlocked, immovable, assigned to a definite spatial location. On Kawara alters this traditional understanding of visual arts by introducing a new kinetic, mobile axis. Paradoxically, the mechanics of precision and calculation play a significant role in his artistic creativity, yet it is not a traditionally defined role of establishing harmonious proportions, the illusion of perspective, the resemblance to live objects, or the precise, excellent preference of color, instead his art exhibits the precision in measuring space and time, usually attributed to cartographers and clocks, or *Moirai*. His idea introduces a new sense of objectivity to traditionally subjective mode of artistic creation, this objectivity, however, is ironically subverted by his choice of an artistic medium. Notably, to express the inhuman, mechanical language of digits, he does not refer to any mechanical medium, but instead chooses a time-consuming and rather classical hand-work, as a monk

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<sup>12</sup> J. L. Nancy, *The Technique of the Present...*, p. 199.

involved in an impersonal and monotonous procedure of copying the sacred words of the Bible, “not, however, in the sense of copying or a recopying, since there is nothing here that could be copied, but in the sense of a bringing forth, a putting forward,”<sup>13</sup> adds Nancy. The fact that On Kawara struggles with the infinite dimension of time, in a sense modulates the experience of time from the universal perspective of the Absolute Creator, as if exploring the limits of participation in the eternity and the limits of human apprehension that adds additional depth to this comparison.

His art is mimetic, but not in relation to the static visual image, it rather reflects the dynamics of time and movement or an escape of the artistic self. His art appeals to imagination giving the viewer the impression of the ongoing time and space migration. In this way, On Kawara introduces a new aesthetic experience of time as well as the aspect of global, universal humanism to visual arts. His artistic gesture of employing various languages in his paintings, reflecting always his current geographical location, gives his art a sense of universality, which exposes and criticizes traditionally somehow local status of a work of art. The locality, the cultural attribution of art, seems to be as abstract and absent as the subject of On Kawara’s art, which is the sublime and cosmic spacing of the present.

Moreover, his art is, in a unique sense, abstract though its peculiar rhetoric of tautology. As Nancy says: in case of On Kawara “painting and subject are identified with one another and through one another.”<sup>14</sup> Numbers and letters are painted in white as if to emphasize the inhuman, sacred dimension of the painter’s investigation. The topic does not exist as it is not depicted by the use of any hue. Moreover, it is the opposite of the usual presentation of a printed over white book page with black lettering. In this way, On Kawara creates a technique of anti-printing, writes an anti-book, in a language of emptiness, purity, and truth. The issue of truth certainly lies at the center of his art. Ironically, he plays with the historical conventions, the historical approach to the very history of art itself by the gesture of replacing the painting with the date, and in this way effacing the border between a painting and its mistakenly dated forgery. The truth of these paintings are their dates. In this sense, the language of the artist is the language of the straightforward truth and sincerity without resorting to any illusions or deceit. This is the truth in painting (paraphrasing Derrida’s phrase), On Kawara seems to be saying, and you as the viewer have no other choice, but to believe me. In this way, the artist tests and plays with the performative role of art. “Its veracity (the date of the day on which it was painted) has no other attestation than itself, since the painting could well have been

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

painted on another date. Likewise, its truth (the actual day of the actual date of the actual day on which it was painted) is lost from the moment that this day and, with it, the act of painting, is over." (Nancy 2006, 2004) argues Nancy.

This truth and certainty is the phenomenological certainty of the Cartesian ego, which takes for granted only its own solitary, existential thinking and the counting process. In this sense, On Kawara's art is the true art governed and established by the principle of immanence. At the same time, Nancy points to another meaning implied in the English word "date." As a verb, it refers also to the meaning of an encounter, "The date marks the possibility of the encounter, counts it or en-counters it (...)"<sup>15</sup> with the viewer, the Other, himself, the Absolute, "the encounter between seeing and vision"<sup>16</sup>. In this way, On Kawara exposes another dimension of time, which Emmanuel Levinas calls a mode of being outside being, the relation of thinking to the Other – the participation in the human or transcendental being. The possible mental encounter that can be predicted in the act of the intersection of thought and art is the already suggested one: between On Kawara and the philosopher who traced the certainty and doubt in the uniformity of intellectual thought – Descartes.

The other possible extension, which I will elaborate in the following part of this paper, is the link with Samuel Beckett. A famous American critic Ihab Hassan claims that: "There is no doubt, for instance, that Beckett is intimate with the details of Descartes' thought and life (...)" However in the postmodern world, Hassan claims: "the starting point of meditation is no longer the Cartesian "Je pense, doc je suis," but rather, "Je me doute;" and the point is quickly reached where the facts of inquiry dissolve into reality of the inquirer, casting further doubt on both."<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly enough, time experienced in On Kawara's paintings is also linear thus, as if marked by an inherent doubt (sometimes more than one painting refers to one day), it is dispersed, composed of various scattered moments, flashes of life and death. It is their plurality which reflects our always inadequate human perception of time that gives them meaning, which our imagination can compose into one abstract idea of infinity. On Kawara's time is obscurely anonymous, impersonal, devoid of any personal experiences or comments. Its rhetoric is not that of a confessional diary, instead a very official, detached, dispassionate, and almost bureaucratic mode was adopted by the artist for the purpose of this expression. In other words, from a formal point of view, On Kawara chose a non-expressive medium of regularized typefaces, however, the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> I. Hassan, *The Literature of Silence. Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 1967, p. 127.

inherent expressionism of his work reveals itself in his passionate and selective attitude towards time. The issue of chance and probability, a desire to put regularity to test or evade it altogether, a vain attempt at calculating being seem to be at stake here. According to a mystic logic of events, On Kawara calculates and wanders around the space, plays with the sense of infinity, the ratio of favorable and unfavorable cases. A strong sense of despair and desolation, of the inescapable mineness of the self, pervades the complex atmosphere of On Kawara's works that resemble the sense of isolation and silence peculiar to the plays of Beckett. A famous critic of the rhetoric of postmodernism Ihab Hassan claims:

That Beckett's art is wrested from impossibility should be evident enough from his works: they mark an asymptotic line moving steadily, cruelly, toward silence and impossibility. The end in view is glacial, aboriginal sleep. By contrast, our daily world seems a giant garb heap from which our lives rise like polluting stream. Is the end of such an art, then, to freeze life perpetuity?<sup>18</sup>

In one of his most abstract plays: *...but the clouds...* one finds an idiosyncratic tension between the point of stasis and mobility, sleep and the state of intense awareness, absence and participation. Notably, in the instructions for this play Beckett resorts to a visual drawing of the stage: a circle surrounded by the word "shadow" four times repeated (on west, east, north, and south side). "*Set*: circular, about 5 m. diameter, surrounded by deep shadow. *Lighting*: a gradual lightening from dark periphery to maximum light at center."<sup>19</sup> On Kawara's paintings are not circular, but they are always based on a central composition. In On Kawara's paintings the central position of a number and its light hue contrast with the dark background in On Kawara's paintings mirrors the composition of Beckett's stage design. Moreover, the sense of loneliness and despair of human experience, which is somehow expressed with fascination and the drive towards large numbers and the psychological escape into calculation surfaces in Beckett's *...but the clouds...* The final stage of infinity is silence, since any speech proves not adequate to phrase the folly of numbers and entropy. Hassan argues: "in silence and entropy, Beckett himself writes: "<To restore silence is the role of objects.> Meantime, however, mind is set free from decaying matter, it turns endlessly upon itself, droning and dribbling words, and playing with numbers and system."<sup>20</sup> It seems worth to refer to the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> S. Beckett, *Ends and Odds. Plays and Sketches*, Faber&Faber, London 1977, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> I. Hassan, *The Literature of Silence...*, p. 129.

passage from Beckett's play that deals with the existential value and the vain consolation placed in numbers, proportions and wandering around the space deep down into the dead night:

52. V: Right. There was of course a fourth case, or case nought, as I pleased to call it, by far the commonest, in the proportion say of nine hundred and ninety-nine to one, or nine hundred and ninety-eight to two, when I begged in vain, deep down into the dead of night, until I wearied, and ceased, and busied myself with something else, more... rewarding, such as...such as...cube roots, for example, or with nothing, busied myself with nothing, that MINE, until the time came, with break of the day, to issue forth again, void my little sanctum, shed robe and skull, resume my hat and greatcoat, and issue forth again, to walk the roads. (Pause.) The back roads.<sup>21</sup>

Notably, obsessive counting of time (in seconds) and space (in solitary steps) seems to be essential for Beckett's rhetoric in this play based on the directions of the world:

53. Dissolves to S empty. 2 seconds. MI in robe and skullcap emerges from north shadow, advances five steps and stands facing camera. 2 seconds. He turns left and advances five steps to disappear in east shadow. 2 seconds. He emerges in hat and greatcoat from east shadow, advances five steps and stands facing west shadow. 2 seconds. He advances five steps to disappear in west shadow. 2 seconds.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas proposes considering loneliness and the attempts to escape from the self, a separate category of being, a significant element of the dialectics of being and the economy of being. It establishes itself in the opposition to Heidegger's dialectics of the relation of *Dasein* to others and the society and its impersonal status. I am absolutely alone, claims Levinas, exposing the deepest level of human condition. My existence is always only mine, belongs and is experienced only by me, and it is absolutely intransitive and impossible to communicate to others in its utterly private and inane essence. When the relation between the one that exists and his or her existence is transgressed hypostasis takes place, according to Levinas. Could On Kawara's paintings be considered in the light of hypostasis? They seem to possess the quality of abstractness and an individual existence at the same time. They illustrate and convey only his individual relation to being itself. Impersonal and private, at the same time,

<sup>21</sup> S. Beckett, *Ends and Odds...*, p. 55-56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

they remain a trace of a pure and bright touch of being. The state of hypostasis involves the subject in a deep experience of his existence, which comes down on him or her to broaden their state of awareness. This act of spiritual illumination takes the form of writing with light, white paint, in On Kawara's art, to celebrate the passage of each day with regularity that resembles the commitment of prayer. Levinas notes that the notion of clear visibility and the pureness of perception, as if in the lightness of clarity and precision, was crucial also for Husserl's transcendental constitution. Light constitutes and differentiates the interval of space and the self. Being, according to Levinas, may also be described in terms of a background layer, perhaps the white layer, out of which the perception can extract particular shapes and things. It can be expressed through the forms of the verb rather than noun, states Levinas, which may point to the fact that On Kawara's procession of dates is a painterly manifestation of the anonymous field of being itself in its becoming. Each act of painting is a hypostasis of presence, an event of opening made forcibly as if by pulling apart the tissue of the infinite being. It records a glimpse of presence which materializes itself at the borderline between Being and beings, the relationship of "I" to himself or herself, which Levinas calls a sticky, thoughtless, incumbent duplicate of the self. The material aspect of this event is an ontological necessity. In this sense, art and body are both fundamental ontological elements which make freedom possible. The materiality of the loneliness of the self, which is crucial for this artistic project, plays a significant role in establishing and overcoming the interval between the self [*le soi*] and "I" [*le moi*]. It is light that allows for the emanation of something other (art) from within oneself, but in such a way that it always retains an element of one's experience. Pain and suffering, associated with the loneliness of the self, pervade the time of being, which is especially evident in Beckett's plays. As Levinas states the self is sentenced to being with no way to escape or evade it, it is embattled by life and existence. On Kawara produces daily traces of this sense of participation and the imminence of death, inter alia, in his series of telegrams composed of a simple existential message "I am still alive." Therefore, his work is also an ongoing meditation on the nature of the participation in the presence and absence in the context of the Other. The horizon of the future brings with itself the pure event of mystery of death, the Other that is the absolute absence.

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## **PARTYCYPACJA W TERAŻNIEJSZOŚCI I ROZSUWANIE CZASU: ON KAWARA, NANCY, LEVINAS (streszczenie)**

Rozważania zawarte w artykule dotyczą pogłębionej analizy problematyki terażniejszości, partycypacji i czasowości w kontekście sztuki konceptualnej On Kawary. Mamy w niej do czynienia ze swoistym „otwieraniem czasu” poprzez „rozsufanie”. W twórczości artysty retoryczna figura sztuki uwidacznia się poprzez wymierzanie czasu. Sztuka konceptualna staje się w tym przypadku symbolem kreacji absolutnej – czasu i partycypacji w nieskończonej terażniejszości, w nawiązaniu do eseju Jean-Luca Nancy’ego *The Technique of the Present On On Kawara*. Malarstwo On Kawary dotyka również problemu Heideggerowskiego bycia i rzucenia-w-swiat, uczestnictwa w jego wydarzeniach i ruchu. Materialność samotności “ja”, kluczowa dla opisywanego projektu artystycznego, rozważana jest także w odniesieniu do myśli Emmanuela Levinasa i dramatu Samuela Becketta ... *jak obłoki...*

**Słowa kluczowe:** terażniejszość, czas, partycypacja, filozofia, sztuka konceptualna, On Kawara