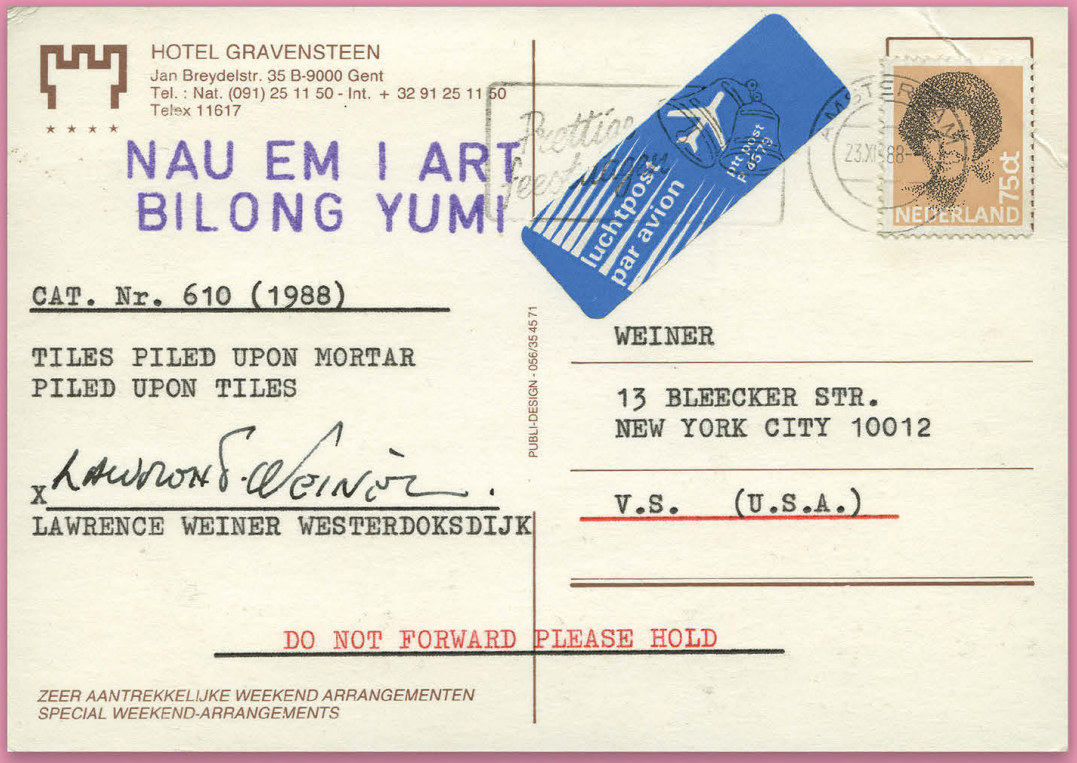
Destination & Destiny

Postcards as Emblems of Contemporary Art

GREGOR STEMMRICH



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Introduction

In art museums and other exhibition institutions, one can usually purchase postcards featuring reproductions of works in the collection or the exhibition. Picture postcards displaying reproductions of urban or regional landmarks are popular with tourists. They are usually of famous buildings, squares, or outdoor sculptures that art historians consider works of art, yet are not generally perceived as "art," but rather as characteristic elements of the ambient. Postcards with cityscapes or rural motifs often have recognizable visual traditions that continue to have an effect without it being necessary to speak of or think of art. One can establish a gradient of postcard motifs ranging from those tied to the idea of "art" to those that cause it to recede partially or entirely into the background.

In the context of art, one can observe a similar yet different gradient. The question here is not whether what is shown on a postcard appears to be related to the concept of art or *can* seem to be related to it given a corresponding cognitive predisposition, but whether a specific postcard should be considered art. Ever since postcards have existed, artists have now and again sent drawings, watercolors, collages, and so on, on postcards, only to a single person in each case but knowing that the card will pass through many hands on the way and does not enjoy the privacy of the letter. Every postcard that is handwritten for the purpose of sending it is a unique object; it makes no difference whether the elements being sent include visual ones produced by hand in addition to handwritten ones. Nevertheless, one would only speak of an "original" if the visual elements were made by a renowned artist, and if an interest in producing reproductions of these elements has made itself known. It is different when artists modify existing postcards with lasting changes, such as partial painting over, covering up, cutting out, and so on, to create works of art that are destined to be considered originals from the outset. The interest manifest in such interventions lies not in a postal communication to another person (or at least not primarily), but in using art to shed light on an intellectual and emotional attitude toward the ubiquitous existence of postcards. Conversely, this draws attention to the singular existence of the specific aesthetic transformation. But because postcards usually exist and find use as mass-produced

articles, it seemed more meaningful and more advantageous to many artists to produce editions of their own postcard designs. To be considered art, they have to distinguish themselves from reproductions of existing works of art on postcards. This seems most likely if such editions reveal typical characteristics of an artist's work that have been made to emphasize the postcard format and postal existence. They are offered commercially for individual use and as collector's objects. These postcards must be distinguished in turn from invitation cards to art exhibitions and events, which can be designed by or in consultation with the artist who is exhibiting or performing and are therefore perceived as a manifestation of her or his art or simply as a manifestation of aesthetic preferences; however, because postcards are used as a medium of dissemination, it is not necessary to think of the card itself as "art." That does not rule out unusually designed invitation cards being perceived and collected as multiples.

Multiple, edition, and original are categories that the institutional art system offers to give works the status of art. The mail art created and propagated around 1960 in the context of Fluxus should be seen in an ambivalent relationship to these categories. Artists used the postal system to distribute artistic manifestations—sometimes to undermine a system of art that seemed all too self-satisfied and exclusive, sometimes to compensate for the lack of a system of art and to undermine the censorship of an authoritarian regime. The first option can be observed paradigmatically, but by no means exclusively, in North America and the second in South America.[1] Mail art does not per se imply a rejection of the possibility of exhibiting it, should an occasion or opportunity arise; what seemed crucial was rather that these artistic manifestations were not conceived from the outset as exhibition objects or commodities. In principle, however, that made it possible to apply institutionalized categories such as multiple, edition, and original as necessary to manifestations of mail art.

Mail art *can* be a postcard, but it makes no sense to limit the term to postcards. That is also true of the categories multiple, edition, and original. When they are postcards, the focus is on their specific design, which has to differ from that of an ordinary postcard to justify a claim to be art. By contrast, several artists, rather than focusing on the specific artistic *designs* of postcards, developed *uses* and contextualizations of postcards that established a rapport between the postal system and the system of art that contravened established expectations.

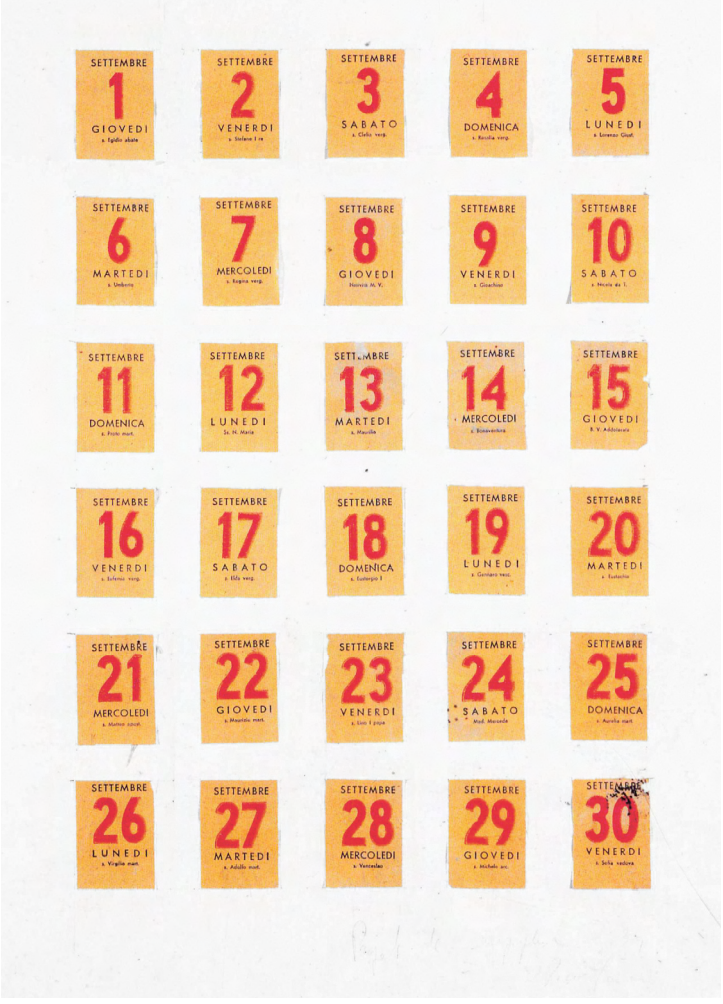
This book is intended to shed additional light on six artistic positions on picture postcards. Art historically, they can best be categorized as Conceptual Art, as long as one does not assume that the artists themselves would have proposed or chosen this term. The positions are those of On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner, Susan Hiller, Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, and Mathilde ter Heijne. Weiner repeatedly spoke out against calling his art

1 Zanna Gilbert, "Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms," *En Caiana: Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)* 4 (2012), https://caiana.caiana.com.ar/dossier/2014-1-04-d12/.

"conceptual"; On Kawara always refused official interviews. Broodthaers and Asher are categorized by art historians as "institutional critique," which can be understood as a particular branch of the larger category "Conceptual Art." The term "institutional critique" began to circulate only after these artists had already developed their approaches, and it was later challenged and sometimes replaced by the category "critique of institutions."[2] One problem related to these categories is that they were tied to orthodoxies that, as illuminating as they could be in the context of various discourses, often tended to have the effect of putting a stranglehold on possible levels of meaning. Susan Hiller developed an artistic practice that she herself called "paraconceptual," after orthodox definitions of "Conceptual Art" had provided occasion to criticize her art's affinity to Romanticism and Pop Art. That did not prevent her work from continuing to be categorized as Conceptual Art. In fact, the term has become quite meaningless, because in the meanwhile all art that cannot be assigned to the traditional arts of painting and sculpture can be called "conceptual" according to taste and need, including the more recent art of Mathilde ter Heijne. The goal of what follows cannot and should not be to view forms of artistic practice through the lens of established art historical categories in order to anchor them in these categories more effectively, but rather to ask—using the example of specific forms of artistic practice employing postcards—how they relate both to the art context and to the culturally most common approach to postcards. Noting the fact that postcards are not connected to the art context per se, artists may have seen them as suited to use in adopting a considered position both on the established art context and on common social practices with postcards.

In general, it can be said that while works and traditions of art have found manifestations that conform to the format of the picture postcard, postcards have found uses that conform to the context of art. The focus here is on artistic practices for the use of postcards that do not fall in the common categories of art edition, invitation card, and mail art and therefore represent all the more of a challenge in reflecting on art.

2 See my discussion of the genealogy of the discourse with and about these terms in my book *Robert Rauschenberg's* Erased de Kooning Drawing *(1953): Modernism, Literalism, Postmodernism*, trans. Steven Lindberg (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2023), pp. 836–37.



10 Piero Manzoni,
1–30 settembre 1959, 1959
Collage, 65 × 60 cm

[1]

On Kawara

When Piero Manzoni arranged thirty numbers from a tear-off calendar at equal distances to form a grid and then glued it to a sheet of paper, thereby introducing an everyday graphic notation of time into avant-garde art (*1–30 settembre 1959*, 1959, 65 × 60 cm), he presumably did not suspect how much potential this manifestly conceptual impetus had. Clearly, it was at first simply an effort to expand and transform Duchamp's concept of the readymade. In historical retrospect, however, it seems necessary to relate the leading concepts of Roman Opalka, On Kawara, and Hanne Darboven to Manzoni's elemental aesthetic gesture, even though they very probably had no knowledge of Manzoni's foray when they developed their own artistic approaches. The contrary directions of a historical and a genealogical perspective reveal a gap that cannot be filled with historical knowledge. One might explain this by saying that certain ideas were proverbially "in the air" in the 1960s, and that the idea of developing an artistic approach to graphic notation was clearly one of them. The relevant differences between the various artistic approaches that espoused this idea are obvious; art critics and art historians contributed to a deeper understanding of the differences in these approaches. What received little attention, however, was the role of the postcard in On Kawara's art.

To contextualize On Kawara's use of postcards within his oeuvre, several widely known facts should be mentioned. In 1966, On Kawara began his *Today* series and his *I Read* series. Two years later, the *I Went* series, the *I Met* series, and the *I Got Up* series followed. He began each series without determining when it would end. The *Today* series consists of Date Paintings on which On Kawara noted, following a comparatively elaborate procedure based on rules he had established, the date of the day on which he began and also finished the work.[1] Each Date Painting has a precisely fitted box, many of which contain a newspaper clipping from the day on which On Kawara produced that Date Painting. On Kawara also used headlines from the clipped articles as subtitles for the Date Paintings. The *I Read* series consists of newspaper clippings from the day on which On Kawara produced a Date Painting and/or the following day. That the *I Read* clippings, which are filed in "loose-leaf binders," stem in part from the day after the production of a

1 On Kawara's *Today* series has been much exhibited and discussed. See, for example, *On Kawara: Date Paintings in 89 Cities*, exh. cat. Museum Boymans-van Beuningen (Rotterdam, 1991), and René Denizot, *On Kawara*, exh. cat. MMK – Museum für Moderne Kunst (Frankfurt am Main, 1991). Anne Rorimer has discussed the series in the context of the efforts of other artists to push back against illusionism and Abstract Expressionism in painting: "The Date Paintings of On Kawara," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991): pp. 137 and 179–80. What has yet to be discussed, as far as I know, is Robert Rauschenberg's apostrophizing of "today" in relation to his White Paintings, about which he wrote in a letter to Betty Parsons in 1951: "It is completely irrelevant that I am making them—Today is their creater [*sic*]"; Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, exh. cat. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, The Menil Collection, Houston, The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), p. 230. On this, see chapter 3, "The Temporal Horizon of the 'Monochrome No-Image'," in Gregor Stemmrich, *Robert Rauschenberg's* Erased de Kooning Drawing *(1953): Modernism, Literalism, Postmodernism*, trans. Steven Lindberg (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2023), pp. 81–157.

Date Painting suggests that the experience of "presence" involves the notion of the "just past" or what will be the "just past." The choice of the newspaper clipping that is part of the box of a Date Painting finds a resonance chamber in the *I Read* series. Dan Graham—a friend of On Kawara who made the idea of an extended presence a major theme of his own art—referred in interviews to the Rolling Stone song "Yesterday's Papers" from 1967 to highlight an attitude that denies the "just past" any relevance. On Kawara's art counteracts this attitude in its own way by announcing the present while receding incessantly into the past. It lends dignity to the ephemeral. The choice of newspaper clippings indicates that for On Kawara "I read" implies a singling out of something read: the decision to present something as having been read by him.

The three series *I Went*, *I Met*, and *I Got Up* differ from the *I Read* series because they offer no reason to assume that the information listed is not exhaustive. In *I Got Up*, On Kawara recorded daily the exact time when he got up in the morning (in some cases, also in the afternoon); in *I Met*, listed the names of people he had met that day; and in *I Went*, sketched on a photocopied map the route he had taken that day, which clearly he could do only at the end of the day. The three series as a trilogy thus reproduce the course of the artist's day, without revealing any special internal or external circumstances that determined or could have determined this course.

What newspapers print presumes the idea of a public interest, no matter whether they are reports on world-historical events or trivialities. The newspaper clippings collected by On Kawara in *I Read* offer eloquent evidence of that. But the act of collecting lends something private to the newspaper clippings, while this act as a concept for art has its own claim to publicness that suspends the binary opposition of the relationship of private and public. The three series that were begun later—*I Got Up*, *I Met*, and *I Went*—all originate with the idea that the information listed could only be of private interest, only to attest to them nevertheless a public interest as manifestations of a concept of art. The different series together thus raise the question of how the public interest that communications printed in newspapers presume relates to the public interest that concepts of art claim.

Getting up, meeting people, taking routes, and reading are activities that permit the assumption that everyone does them daily. Keeping books of these activities implies the possibility of showing that several or all of these activities were canceled on certain days. And even if the artist takes meticulous notes of these activities, therein lies, if this is supposed to be constitutive of a work, a willingness to consider the linguistic role of "I" as shifter. Roman Jakobson called "shifters" linguistic expressions whose referential meaning depends entirely on the context of their use (for example, "here," "now," "I," "you," "today," "yesterday"). *In principle*, anyone reading the "I" in the title of these series can apply it to her- or himself, while the information listed is meant to be

understood as specific examples.[2] The context of use is thus neither clearly private nor clearly public. On Kawara's "I" is therefore subject to tension. His art can be understood as a policy to deal with this tension. Part of this policy is that On Kawara can speak of himself in relation to art because he simultaneously makes it clear that he is speaking for anyone. And part of that is that he need not deny the private dimension of what he has taken down after all, because it is part of his life. His art's claim to publicness seems justified because it makes it possible to see that the relationship of tension between private and public affects everyone, and that art offers an opportunity to deal with this relationship of tension. His *I Read* series makes this clear because it presents as art a private selection of newspaper reports that presume a public interest. In his art, On Kawara brought obviously banal activities—getting up, reading the newspaper, taking routes, meeting people—and the taking down of these activities as an activity into relation with a world event that he knew only from the media (newspaper, radio, television). The question of his use of postcards is raised against this backdrop. Because as a form of communicating the private, the postcard has a public quality.

The *I Got Up* series differs from the others in that On Kawara did not note the time he got up on a sheet of paper, say, that could then have been filed in a binder; rather, he sent souvenir postcards with photographic views and sights of the place where he was at the time to friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and collectors with the words "I GOT UP AT" (always in English and in capital letters), followed by the time down to the very minute. All the details (date, message, address, recipient's address) are printed on the card with rubber stamps, which in relation to the postmark and the printed texts on the card seem like a kind of mimicry that, in an idiosyncratic way, lends the text side of the card a quasi-official character that clearly contradicts its obviously touristically inspired image side. If what was being communicated were not completely banal, one would want to know what authority is concealed behind this appearance.

The *I Got Up* series is based on a few constitutive rules, but following them says nothing about their use. For example, the rules allow for On Kawara sending just one card to a person or sending the same card to a person each day over an extended period. They also allow for On Kawara sending an addressee postcards from a city in a sequence that recognizably offers a virtual tour through the city. All that is ruled out is sending postcards from a city other than the one in which he is staying. Because On Kawara printed both his current address as sender and the address of the recipient on every *I Got Up* card, it was in each case possible for the recipient to reply. But it was well known that On Kawara was constantly changing his location, so that this real possibility pointed even more to the uncertainty of whether a written reply would reach the artist at the place he indicated. Both the cards and the rules constitutive of

2 Kathryn Chiong has focused on the significance of the private, the autobiographical, in On Kawara's art, based largely on statements by Jacques Derrida; see Kathryn Chiong, "Kawara on Kawara," *October*, no. 90 (Autumn 1999), pp. 50–75. It seems more important to me to focus on the *relationship* of private and public in On Kawara's art.