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#4.1 Na(me/am)

Yuki Okumura

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My **name** is Lei Yamabe. Well, no, I *am* Lei Yamabe, as I am the **name** itself. My profession is art critic, but having no physical body, I cannot write. The **name** of my ghostwriter, so to speak, is Yuki Okumura, an artist working in the field of contemporary art. For his occasional writing, especially when reflecting on the work of the conceptual artist On Kawara, I serve as his pen **name**. He coined me as a “mirror” of On Kawara, with *on* (literally “warmth” in Japanese) and *kawara* (“riverbank”) alternated, respectively, to *lei* (“coldness”) and *yamabe* (“mountainside”). In 2009, Okumura ghostwrote my essay to present a unified theory that encompasses both Kawara’s early figurative drawings from the 1950s and his conceptual pieces that followed. Kawara somehow found this text, liked it, and later put its English translation¹⁾ in the book that accompanied his 2012 show at the gallery David Zwirner in New York, during which Okumura flew there to meet him in person.

Just like me, Jiro Sahara is a mere **name** as well. It is the pen **name** of the novelist Katsusuke Miyauchi, and also serves as the pseudonym of the protagonist in his 1980 autobiographical novel *Griniji no hikari wo hanarete* (Away from the Light of Greenwich).²⁾ It tells the story of Miyauchi’s life in New York and other cities in the late 60s, in which the protagonist, **narrating** from the first-person point of view, is identified just as “I” and remains anonymous. In need of a fake identity to survive as an illegal resident in the United States, “I” conceives a false **name** linked to his longtime existential wish to become “permanently foreign.”³⁾ Indeed, Jiro sounds like the French **name** Giraud and Sahara refers to the vast desert across North Africa, while they are both authentic in Japanese **naming**. This somehow resonates with the case of On Kawara, which is a pseudonym as well. The real **name** of the person behind this persona is probably Yutaka

Kawahara,⁴⁾ and it is said that he changed it, by employing different phonations of his Chinese characters, in order to become a “transnational” artist.

In fact, On Kawara appears in this very novel as a fictional character, “On Kawana.” Here, *na*, which means “**name**” in Japanese, revises the original surname, suggesting the theme of the entire **narrative**: how a **name** defines and misdefines one’s identity. Working as a day laborer in Los Angeles, “I” occasionally travels to Mexico City to work on his autobiographical novel in a cheap hotel. There he interacts with Kawana, a New York-based Japanese man on a trip, who has bizarre habits such as depicting on a canvas just the date of the very day and sending out a postcard stamped with the time of his getting up, both on a daily basis. Through chatting with him in his hotel room or over lunch at a local restaurant, “I” develops an idea that Kawana is “the very model of a rootless soul.”⁵⁾ Later, “I” moves to New York. Living in a ghetto and working at a run-down bar as Jiro Sahara, “I” locates Kawana’s apartment near Greenwich Village, reuniting with him and meeting his wife Hiroko. From then on, “I” visits them once in a while, to chat and eat together. One day, “I” is asked to spell his passport **name** for Kawana’s new habit called “I Met,” an act of archiving the **name** of every person he meets each day. While initially hesitant, “I” ends up accepting the request, feeling as if he is now recorded in a time capsule sent into outer space. “I” then even leaves his passport with Kawana.

Yuki Okumura’s spatial audio installation, *Away from the Light of Greenwich: I Met On Kawana* (2016), presents a 30-minute audio drama based on this novel, adapting not its entirety but a collection of episodes where “I” interacts with Kawana. Inspired by the two common elements in their lives — having used a pseudonym and having met On Kawara in

person — Okumura reenacts Miyauchi's gesture by voice acting as the protagonist without announcing it and instead, crediting his pseudonym, which is me, in the role of Sahara. The other two actors also have their own overlaps with the characters they play; Tatsuo Majima, starring as On Kawana, is an artist who has done a couple of lecture performances on Kawara's practice, while the theater actor and director Mihoko Watanabe, as Hiroko, is Majima's partner in real life.

What is additional to those links between personalities is a superposition, beyond time and space, of Kawana's living room in New York and the current exhibition space. Okumura deliberately chose the form of an audio drama to pay homage to Kawara's absence and invisibility; from the inauguration of his *Today* series in 1966 to his passing in 2014, he had never presented himself to public.⁶⁾ With a 5.1-ch surround sound system, the presence of each character seems "replayed" right in front of you, invisibly and non-physically, analogous to one's sensation when facing Kawara's work. Due to the essential inaccessibility of the artist himself (whether he is still alive or not), his canvases, postcards, and telegrams, etc., serve as the only medium that communicates the state of his body, which is somewhere not "here," sometime not "now."

"I" has mythified Kawana as a "daily-employed transcriber for God," restlessly transmitting records of all the unnamed days into an eternal void. Realizing, however, it is for him first of all an act of art-making, "I" decides to get his passport back,

saying goodbye to Kawana and Hiroko, and even to the country itself. Meanwhile, Okumura's idealization of the senior artist as an immaterial figure was once disrupted as well, as he directly observed the body of Kawara — well, precisely, Kawahara — and even shook hands with him after a durational dialogue at his home in New York. However, as soon as Okumura went out to the street, the remnant of the physical touch vanished from his palm into the cold air, turning the artist ghostly again. This personal episode, as well as another anecdote about Kawara's reason not to attend his own openings, are incorporated into the plot, making the audio piece a double autobiography of the novelist/artist.

The last scene of the piece is set on a riverbank of the Ganges, where "I," having watched numerous bodies on fire, considers Hito, meaning "human," as his new forename. "I" then sends Kawana a postcard informing of his current latitude and longitude. Some days later, a telegram arrives. "I" reads it out, along with Kawana's voice echoing in his head — "I am still alive."⁷⁾ But who are they being alive? Kawahara used to be alive, and Miyauchi and Okumura are still alive, but Kawara/Kawana, Sahara, and I *cannot* live (or die). One thing is for sure, we *are* all names in the end, either originally or post-humously, existing as long as anyone remembers us. The work ends with Mihoko/Hiroko reading a credit note, and then a disclaimer: "All characters and events depicted in this audio drama are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental." But what is actuality, and who is actual, really?⁸⁾

1) Lei Yamabe, "On Kawara's Quantum Gravitational Body, or the Confinement of Space-Time and the Liberation of Consciousness," Christopher Hill (trans.), in Tommy Simoons (ed.), *On Kawara: Date Painting(s) in New York and 136 Other Cities* (New York: David Zwirner / Antwerp: Ludion, 2012), pp.141–148
 2) Tokyo: Kawade Shobō, 1980
 3) Jeffrey Weiss, "Bounded Infinity," *On Kawara—Silence* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2015), p.36
 4) Yusuke Minami, "Tokyo jidai no kawara on," *NACT Review: Bulletin of the National Art Center*, no.2 (2015), p. 217

5) Weiss, loc. cit.
 6) Based on the idea that Kawara's entire conceptual oeuvre, spanning nearly five decades, is a single performance where the performer himself was consistently absent, Okumura developed a piece of performance, literally, titled *On Kawara's Pure Consciousness, or Many Worlds (and) Interpretation*, presented in the framework of 14 Evenings, curated by Kenjin Miwa, Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, 2012. An updated version, reflecting Kawara's passing in 2014, was presented in the framework of *Produce III*, curated by Zeynep Oz, Istanbul, 2016.

7) This scene is not from the novel but from the following short essay by the novelist. Katsusuke Miyauchi, "Uchūjin no yōna chikyūjin," in Yusuke Minami and Atsuko Takeuchi (eds.), *On Kawara: Whole and Parts 1964 – 1995* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1998), pp. 157–158.
 8) This remark is inspired by Toshiharu Suzuki's unpublished review of Okumura's exhibition titled *Na*, @KCUA, Kyoto, 2016, curated by Hirokazu Tokuyama, where the audio piece was premiered.