

# The Five Stages

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*We may, indeed, say that the hour of death is uncertain, but when we say this we think of that hour as situated in a vague and remote expanse of time; it does not occur to us that it can have any connection with the day that has already dawned and can mean that death – or its first assault and partial possession of us, after which it will never leave hold of us again – may occur this very afternoon, so far from uncertain, this afternoon whose time-table, hour by hour, has been settled in advance.*

(Proust, 1996, p. 360)

My biggest fear in life is dying without living. My second biggest fear is Death itself. This is a problematic combination considering my definition of 'living' is doing things that may increase the risk of, or resemble the increased risk of, death; I cannot overcome one fear without initiating the other. Struggling to accept the passing of time, I cannot seem look back at my life and remember where all that time has gone, as if it has vanished into an abyss. Photography is often described as a tool for freezing time, catching moments. I can think to my bedroom wall, covered with photographs I have taken or collected over the years, all stories to be plucked. They are there to remind myself that my time had been put somewhere and not lost completely. Time and Death grapple together, forged as entities out of our control. As Proust says, even if we can understand the concept of our own death, we struggle to imagine that it could ever be as imminent as this very day, or tomorrow, or even three months from now. And with this battle against time, we struggle to fulfill our lives and create meaning out of nothing. Because this life is made from nothing, what Alan Watts refers to specifically as 'the most incredible nothing' (Watts in *The Journey of Purpose*, 2013). What I will try to do in this essay is not only explore death's representations and connections with art, but also show the way in which death is denied in our lives, the way it is embraced in others and finally, how it could be accepted as a critical part of living. Much has been written about mass death and our desensitization to these tragedies, but have these images removed us further from the reality of our own death, which may not emerge from chaos and destruction, but a sudden accident or a slow quiet drift into darkness?

We live to deny the concept and possibility of our own death. 'Many people in our culture have faith in the immortality of their souls, but it is a far harder and far rarer act of faith to believe that we will die' (Dastur, 2012, pg. x). This act of 'faith', if spoken in terms of religious belief, is deniability in and of itself, considering many religion's beliefs of a life-after-death; therefore death is still not accepted as the final end. To say death is common knowledge is an understatement, all self-aware individuals know that one-day they must die. But to imagine that in stepping outside to cross the road, catching the next tube or even standing wherever we are in this very moment, our lives could suddenly be over. One accident, misstep or incident and consciousness would be forever gone. I know that this fact is a possibility, yet a certain rationality within me shrugs and dismisses this idea as an unrealistic event. The idea of indefinite yet imminent death is incomprehensible. The individual death is forgotten, or ignored; 'It was no longer inevitable that people had to die from anything other than old age if we poured enough talent and money into conquering disease' (Norfleet, 1993, pg. 13). Not long ago in history it was usual for one's death to take place at home, surrounded by family and loved ones, it was uncommon for a parent to not have suffered the loss of at least one child

and our overall lifespan was drastically shorter. Now we die in hospitals, being tended to by unfamiliar faces, away from our homes and loved ones. Death is further removed than it has ever been, yet without the fear of death it seems we cannot fully encounter life. Extreme sports, sky-diving and other dangerous activities grant us a denial of death; that we can come so close to death and survive only reinforces our sense of immortality; 'we attack and scar our bodies, we pop pills and rush into surgeries in order to show that our bodies belong to us' (ibid. pg. xiv).

In 1969, On Kawara began to send out telegrams reading, "I AM STILL ALIVE" (See Fig. 1) to colleagues, friends and family. In over three decades, Kawara sent out nearly nine hundred telegrams (Guggenheim, 2017). The dark humour encumbers an inconsistency; in sending a telegram, Kawara must have been alive, thus negating the necessity of stating this as a fact. However, on receiving this telegram it was possible that the statement was no longer true, as death could have claimed Kawara during that passing of time. Unlike the control we attempt to have over our bodies in modification, Kawara relinquished this aesthetic authority as the telegram's appearances were based on location of arrival, time of delivery and other external factors cause by the use of communications technology. Kawara's obsession with the passing of time presents his belief to be that 'human life

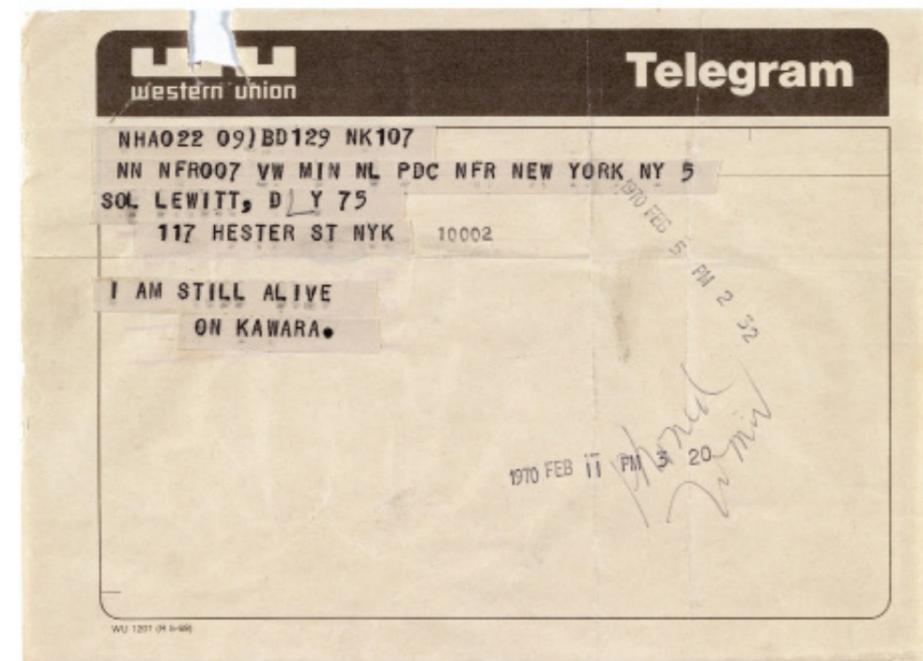


Fig. 1. Kawara, O. (1969) *I am Still Alive*.

does not add up to anything beyond itself' (Watkins, 2014), just as a photograph, as an object, does not. We project meaning into life; through illusory affirmation and symbolic illuminations in a whim to expel the lost physicality of a past event or passed loved one.

In the same year as Kawara started this project, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying* was released, based on her studies and interviews with dying patients:

*He [the patient] may listen to the news full of reports of destruction, war, fires, and tragedies – far away from him, unconcerned about the fight and plight of an individual who will soon be forgotten. So, this patient makes sure that he is not forgotten. He will raise his voice, he will make demands, he will complain and ask to be given attention, perhaps as the last loud cry, "I am still alive, don't forget that. You can hear my voice, I am not dead yet!"*

(Kubler-Ross, 1969, pg. 46)

Whether this acted as part of Kawara's inspiration is unknowable, however, with this context in place, it hard now to interpret Kawara's telegrams without an intrinsic hint of anger and frustration. This slur of everyday consciousness fights to deny death by demanding life. To photograph is to declare life. To declare that I am here, I am alive. In our frustration we seek to find meaning where it is not, we seek to fully experience life and in doing so we obsess and destroy our own sanity and sacrifice any hope of happiness that was once achievable. It is the same when we try to understand an image:

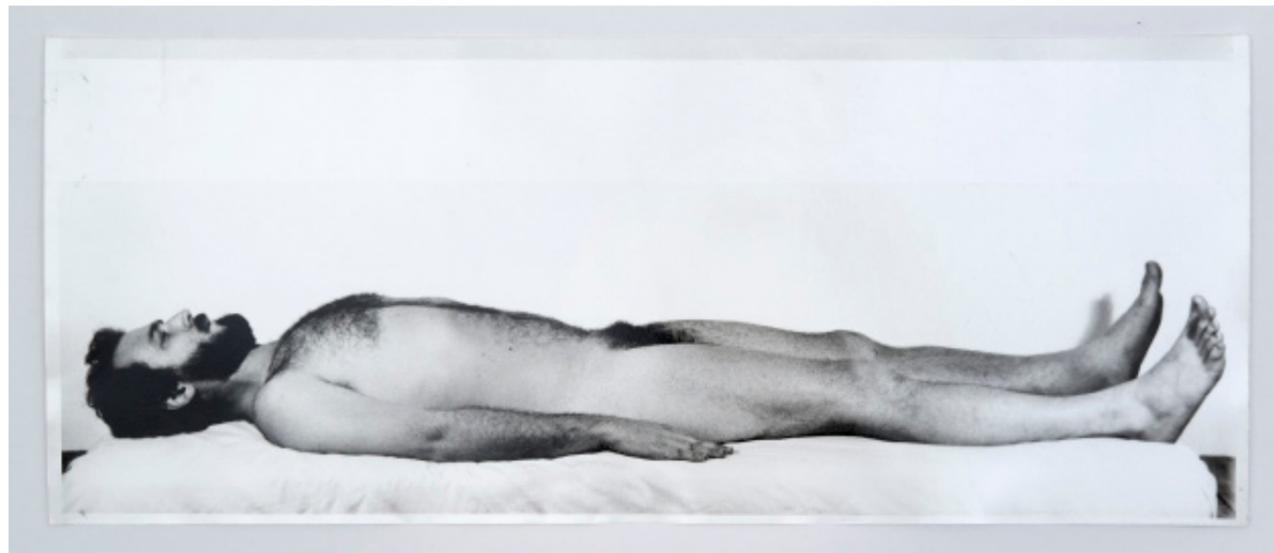
*The lines connecting viewer and viewed objects come together on a screen/picture surface and are explicitly intended to show us a relationship between the subject and the object in which one constitutes the other in an on going process which can never ultimately be totally fulfilling or satisfying for the subject, or indeed either.*

(Doy, 2004, pg.15)

In our culture of commodity and consumerism, we plan for our deaths, that is, those with the benefit of foresight and time to plan do. We divide up our estates, our money and our belongings between those in our lives that mean something to us. Many people decide what they want done with their body after death; some even plan their own funerals. The idea of an unfulfilled life plagues our society, but our society is made from nothingness, we come from nothing. So instead we try to

leave legacies. Something behind for which we are to be remembered. In exploring death, I have written my own Will. This act was performed as a way of bringing the concept of my own death to the forefront of my consciousness. A rational way to come to terms with your own demise is to plan for it. So, as a young person with no estate and a laughable amount of money, I looked to my objects for their meanings and the people in my life that I care deeply for. What I ended up with was a handful of items that I found held the most significance and sentimental value to me, in a way, these items formed a self portrait of myself, of the things that I uncovered and that I had collected over my lifetime. Much like the scenes that had caught my eye through a lens, which I had photographed and hung on my wall, they held memories of my life. Not only did these items form a portrait of me, but also of the person I would be leaving them to and our intrinsic relationship to one another. Like a portrait, these objects could allow for an inkling of a glimpse into the personalities of each of us. However, this same similarity between the object and the portrait causes a frustration, the same dissatisfaction between subject and object. When I am gone, this object will be all that is left; it cannot replace the human connection that was once felt. The same way that a photograph of a lover cannot mimic their warm embrace or fill the void left by their cold absence. The same way we reminisce over youthful photographs of ourselves. But then photographs from our childhood only serve to remind us lost time and our own mortality, that time has indeed passed and each day we draw closer to death. So, am I now more comfortable with the idea of my own death through creating this Will? Or am I just comforted by the idea that at least now each of my loved ones will carry this significant yet sorrowful object, part of my portrait, in hopes that my memory will not be lost as suddenly as my life was, that I do not cease to exist in the minds of all those still living.

Alan Sonfist's piece titled *Last Artwork, Will and Body* (See Fig. 2), in 1972 tackles the idea of the self and the Will as an art piece. Within his Will, he requests that his body, once deceased, would be donated to the Museum of Modern Art for display in a glass case, so that his final work will be the decay of his own body and, therefore, his art would survive him after death (Sutinen, 2016). Although this piece forms a real relationship with death and imposes it into the public sphere in a way not usually seen, if these actions are taken it implies a bargaining with death, not acceptance: an avoidance of his own demise through an after-life of artistic value. The idea of witnessing the real-time decay of a man concocts within us a sense of horror and vulgarity; this is not the image we are used to of death. The image of a closed coffin ushered as quickly as possible into its journey into the ground or into ashes. We would witness a quiet, slow disintegration that simply presents to us what we are to become after our final moments, the true reality of death. Much like essence



**I,** ALAN SONFIST  
*being of sound and disposing mind and memory, and considering the uncertainty of this life, do make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament as follows, hereby revoking all other former Wills by me at any time made.*

*First, after my lawful debts are paid, I give my entire estate to my wife, except*  
 Whereas, my body is my museum, it's a history. It collects and absorbs observations - instructions. It is the deciphering of these recordings that I project into the outside world. My boundaries define the world of art. I clarify my own common boundaries in relationship to the outside whether it be the room I exist in, the couch I exist in, the universe I exist in. By adding other-awarenesses, I am constantly redefining my boundaries and projecting these awarenesses in my art.

My work deals with the idea that the world is always in a state of flux. My art deals with the rhythms of the universe. The pieces are part of that rhythm. A plant grows in cycles - seasons in cycles - my work tries to bring about awareness of these movements. One has to meditate with my work to gain an understanding. It is not the beginning or the end I am concerned with, but the energy that is given or received through communication with my work.

I therefore provide that a list of proposed works of art from my diary should be given to the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, upon my death and carried out for them by my agent on a seasonal basis thereafter.

Finally, because the decay and growth of my body will present the continuation of my work, I bequeath my body in a sealed transparent enclosure to the Museum of Modern Art, New York City to be kept as a work of art accessible to the public.

I hereby appoint Robert Jowanski  
 to be Executor of  
 this is my last Will and Testament.

Fig. 2. Sonfist, A. (1972) *Last Artwork, Will and Body*.

of On Kawara's work, Sonfist would literally embody the notion that we are simply as and of ourselves, nothing more, and after life we turn back to nothing. We are an amount of years between two dates. 'The trip between the maternity ward and the crematorium is what there is to life' (Watts in *The Journey of Purpose*, 2015). However, we cannot accept this life as part of nothingness, so we seek meaning. Meaning in work, in family, in art, in language. Last words are memorialised and often seem unsatisfactory to us, they hold the significance of the conclusion. As if those final words encompass an entire relationship or lifetime. Sophie Calle, in her recent works *my mother, my cat my father, in that order* (2017) deals with the deaths of both her parents and her cat. In one piece, Calle writes about her father's last words, or at least what could have been his last words each day as she left the hospital. Bargaining with death, she believes that if the word were bad it 'could not be the last'. This dependency on language protects us from the finality of death, much like the objects left in my Will; they create something for us to live on through. 'By writing we are denying the ephemeral aspect of our ideas, for now they exist in physical form. We write to deny death its final purchase, death's supposed claim upon our existence' (Reichert, 2009, pg. 2). Calle's attempt to preserve her Father's last words is her own claim on his memory. Negotiating the inevitability of his impending decrease as death claims his body and no longer exists in physical form. However, knowledge of death does not conclude as acceptance of death.

*Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one, a moment, in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don't go on forever. It must have been shattering – stamped into one's memory. And yet, I can't remember it.*

(Stoppard in Limon, 2012)

Much like Lacan's Mirror Stage, that as a child there must have been an instant in which we identified as a self separate to our mother (or caregiver), in which an external image of the body becomes a representation of "I" and we become aware of our own conscious thought, there must have been another instant where we realised this consciousness would also come to an end. The way children think of death differs to adult understanding; children play. Children play doctors and patients; they play soldiers, policemen. They play to decipher and comprehend society's moral conduct. This means that children also play dead. A common justification for families to own animals is to teach children from a young age to accept the idea of death as part of living. However, still parents use the

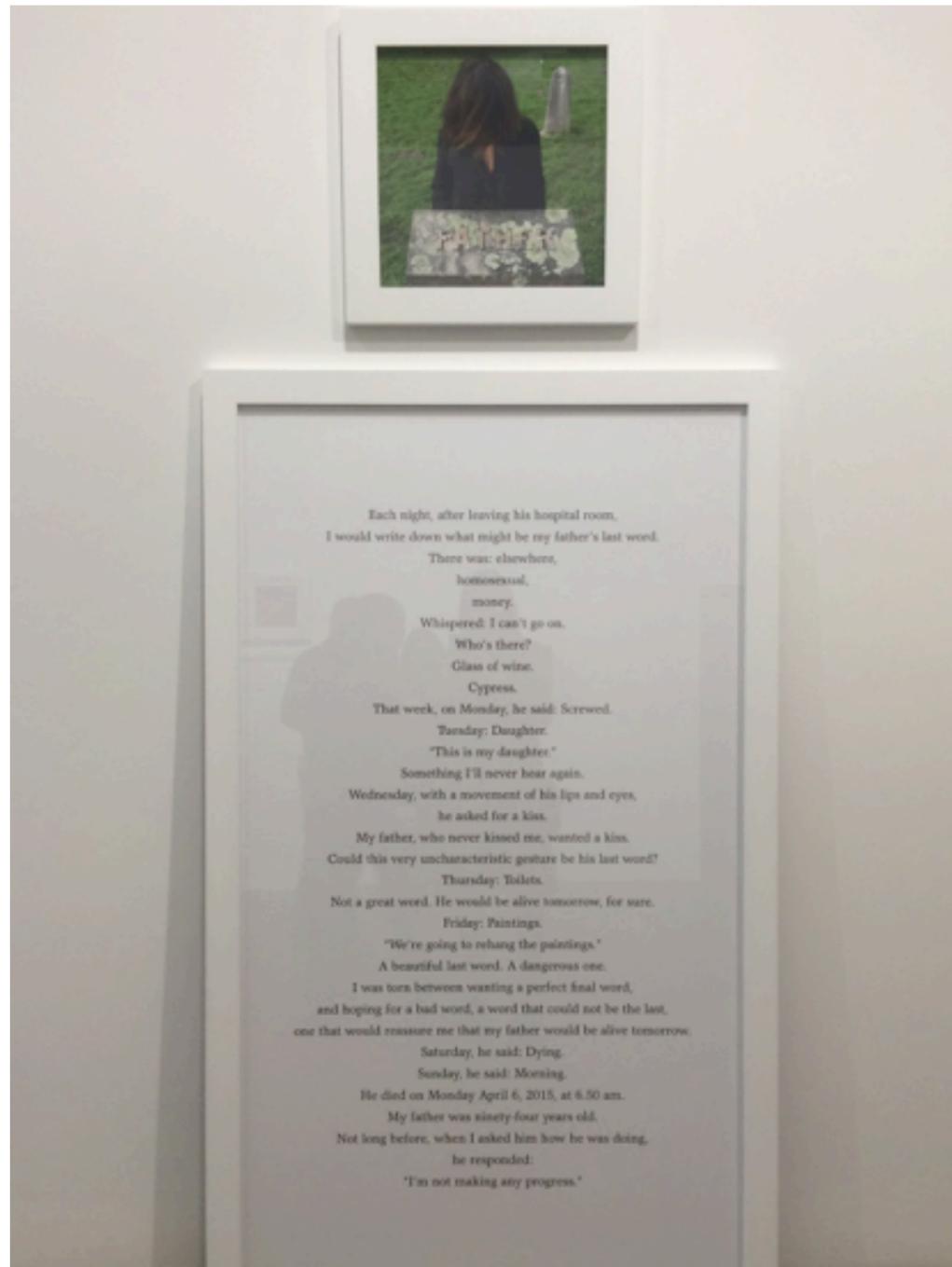


Fig. 3. Calle, S. (2017) *My mother, my cat, my father, in that order.*

same phrases as 'gone to a better place' or 'put down', instead of being straightforward and truthful. I remember one night as a child, walking downstairs to the warm glow of the kitchen to find the rest of my family surrounding our family dog, Toby, who was too weak to move. The next day, Toby was taken to the vets to be 'put down'. For months, possibly even years, each time we entered that vets office I wondered when we would get Toby back. I didn't understand that 'put down' meant never to be seen again. Nevertheless, like Stoppard, I cannot recall the exact moment I realised the truth. To have this specific 'moment' must mean we have the capability to contrast a before period, of which

we were unaware, to an after period, of when we become aware. And although I can do this when thinking of the life of Toby, I cannot do the same for my own mortality.

The effect that this removal from death can have on children can instigate and reinforce our initial denial, considering that our primal contact with death is so diminished in our society. Given that '20% of adolescents may experience a mental health problem in any given year' and '10% of children and young people (aged 5-16 years) have a clinically diagnosable mental problem' (Mental Health Foundation, 2017), there is a recognizable issue surrounding mental health with young people. Although, it must be taken into account that mental health was not a widely thought about issue a few decades back, so comparing figures may not be the best evaluation, but there is a clear rising concern with suicide rates amongst young people (children, teenagers and students alike) (Davis, 2017). A friend of mine who works within the NHS once told me, everyday that she went into A&E, every day, there was a suicide attempt there, most likely a young person. However, even amongst these suicide attempts and depression diagnoses, you will hear the phrase "cry for help". Death no longer becomes the aim, but a device used to gain aid and support. Because, perhaps in some suicide cases, even then our own mortality is not fully realized. Our removal from death cannot be blamed for these statistics, but growing up in this generation, I notice in myself and others a clear dissatisfaction with life in general, whether that is due to personal concerns, mental health, financial instability or endless other reasons. It is a hopeless search for importance in a meaningless world. The dream is no longer to study a field so that you can get a terribly paid job and forage enough money together to buy a house, then you can start a family and raise children just to send them off into the world to go through the same monotonous rhythm of life and after that you get to retire and die, alone in a hospital bed without any loved ones because the idea of death repulses us so much that we'd rather avoid its clutches completely until its our turn to go. It's hard not to feel depressed at the thought.

So instead, we now turn to social media, the platforms of fake lives. Because we cannot feel like we have really lived every important moment without proclaiming it to the world and all our friends, we have to prove that we are living now. In 2009, digital-media artist Pall Thayer continued Kawara's work by programming a Twitterbot. At 10am every single day, this Twitter account, under Kawara's name, posts 'I AM STILL ALIVE' (See Fig. 4) out into the world (Miller, 2015). This work uses contemporary communications technology, just as telegrams were at the time of the original piece, and at the time of its conception Kawara was still alive, but never voiced any objections to the work. However, after Kawara's death in 2014, this Twitterbot becomes false. It is the literal experience

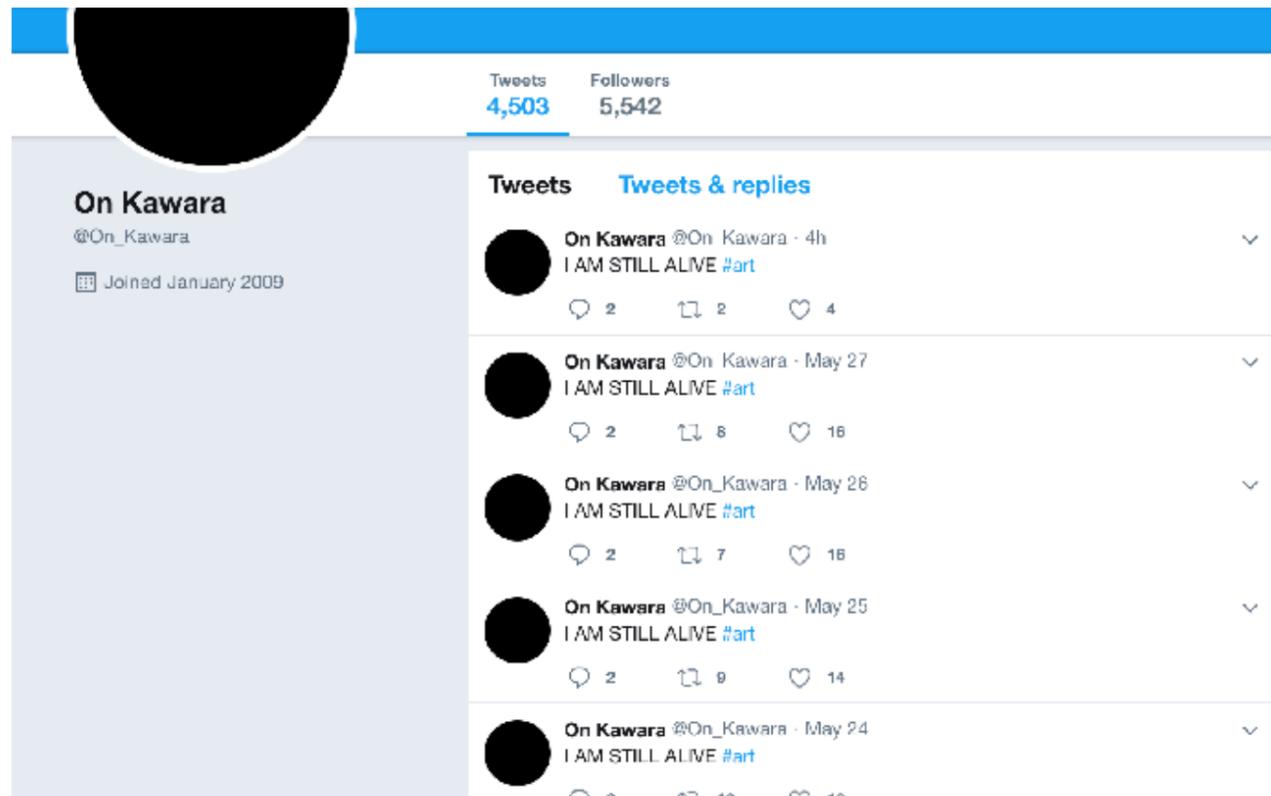


Fig. 4. Kawara, O. (2009–current) [Twitter].

of the death of the author, fixed eternally in an online presence. Each time we post on social media, we imitate this general statement that I am still alive.

So is acceptance possible? Can we bring ourselves back to the point where death is a common and normal function in life, in a time when death is thought of as a tragedy that only the unlucky and the old suffer? And how can we possibly define a “full” life? Even if we do not think a moment as satisfactory, we are still living “fully” in each moment when taking into account the literal term of living as just being alive. This analysis does not stand to answer any of these questions, I am merely trying to identify the issues that lie with each of us, to cast the light on fear a fear of death that I know I cannot be alone in experiencing. We should not relish and reject the idea of life being meaningless and completely made of and from nothingness, because this gives us a chance to create our own meaning. And if can accept this world and life as nothingness, then we may no longer have to deny and avoid death.

We have been through want and joy  
Hand in hand  
Now let us rest from our wanderings  
Over the quiet land.

The valleys slope around us,  
The air already darkens,  
Two larks fly dreamily aloft  
Into the scented air.

Step inside and let them whirl  
Soon, it will be time to sleep  
So that we do not lose our way  
In this, our solitude.

O stay, in silent peace.  
So deep within the sunset,  
We are like walkers overtired—  
Is this perhaps our death?

*Sunset* by Joseph Freiherr Von Eichendorff

## IMAGES

**Fig. 1.** Kawara, O. (1969) I am Still Alive. Available at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/telegrams-i-am-still-alive> (Accessed: 31 May 2017).

**Fig. 2.** Sonfist, A. (1972) Last Artwork, Will and Body. Available at: <http://www.orartswatch.org/alan-sonfist-in-the-nature-of-things/> (Accessed: 31 May 2017).

**Fig. 3.** Calle, S. (2017) My mother, my cat, my father, in that order. DEUTSCHE BORSE PHOTOGRAPHY FOUNDATION PRIZE [Exhibition]. The Photographer's Gallery, London. 3 March – 11 June.

**Fig. 4.** Kawara, O. (2009–current) [Twitter]. Available at: [https://twitter.com/On\\_Kawara?refsrc=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/On_Kawara?refsrc=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) (Accessed: 2 June 2017).

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