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► **To cite this version:**

Ioulia Podoroga. Fragility of the Present. Bergson and On Kawara. Diagnoses of Matter and Memory: Bergson and the Problems of Brain, Time and Memory 8 th International Colloquium of PBJ (Project Bergson in Japan) 2016, 2017. <hal-03581647>

HAL Id: hal-03581647

<https://hal.science/hal-03581647v1>

Submitted on 20 Feb 2022

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Diagnoses of *Matter and Memory*:

Bergson and the Problems of Brain, Time and Memory

8th International Colloquium of PBJ (Project Bergson in Japan) 2016

Fragility of the Present
Bergson and On Kawara

The question that I am concerned with in this talk revolves around the relationship between Bergson's notion of time and contemporary artistic practice. How can *Matter and memory*, considered from a contemporary standpoint and in the perspective of contemporary art, in particular, be re-actualized today? What lessons can it teach? And how exactly can it shed light onto contemporary artistic experience?

I believe that the idea of duration, of capturing time in its pure essence, without transforming it into space (or re-presenting it), still does preoccupy the minds of artists. Of course, if we take time as an abstract notion and not as lived experience, there have been numerous attempts to figure it in art history: through symbols or allegorical visions, at the first place. But that was also before art tried to abandon the idea of imitation and become entirely "abstract" itself. Abstraction opened numerous possibilities. Since art had no longer to refer to the exterior world or to any experience connected to it, it was no longer entitled to re-present or render any recognizable objects; it rather claimed to be destined to create for the first time, to bring into being, to present, instead of re-presenting. So art actually argued to be able to open up a new temporal order. In other terms: by creating a world, it necessarily created time. In its ultimate consequences for our perception of the world, abstract art might indeed realize Bergson's ideal of a completely disinterested posture inherent to the artistic vision as such. No more attached to the objects, all involved in a pragmatic relationship with us, we get in touch with pure forms and colors. As Bergson puts it in his "Laughter", the painter « s'attachera aux couleurs et aux formes, et comme il aime la couleur pour la couleur, la forme pour la forme, comme il les perçoit pour elles et non pour lui, c'est la vie intérieure des choses qu'il verra transparaître à travers leurs formes et leurs couleurs. Il la fera entrer peu à peu dans notre perception d'abord déconcertée. Pour un moment au moins, il nous détachera des préjugés de forme et de couleur qui s'interposaient entre notre œil et la réalité. Et il réalisera ainsi la plus haute ambition de l'art, qui est ici de nous révéler la nature »¹.

¹ *Le Rire*, p. 119.

Bergson insists on the fact that this kind of abstraction practiced in art is a “natural detachment” from action, and not a deliberate rational one – not a philosophical attitude. This disinterested position towards reality does not interfere with the natural existence of things, with their duration, neither with the aesthetic perception itself. There is necessarily coincidence between the artist’s perception and the being of the things as they are. I won’t dwell on the Bergson’s theory of pure perception, and on how exactly the perception is initially embedded in things. I will only retain one simple statement: in art we are dealing with a different temporal order, compared to our everyday life. Our perception is no more oriented exclusively towards a future action, we stop *projecting* ourselves on what is yet to come, but start *experiencing* time in its present unfolding. So if we detach ourselves from action and concentrate on contemplation and observation, then this attention to the present moment will serve us as an entry point into the understanding of time’s nature.

In this talk I would like to clarify what kind of experience brings to existence this present as pure presence (of time) and why the “present” is or should be the central figure of time in the economy of the past-future-present exposed by Bergson.

1. On Kawara and Capturing the Present

In 1997 Jean-Luc Nancy gives a talk with the title “The Technique of the Present”, on the contemporary Japanese artist, On Kawara. The talk is a series of considerations around On Kawara’s exhibit in New Museum/New-York, "Whole and Parts – 1964-1995", and is held at the venue of the exhibit itself².

The main idea put forward by Nancy is that art is not only singularly related to the *present*, as it brings into *presence*, but is essentially a technique to produce the present. *Techné poiétique*, in Greek, art produces something not in a view of its further use or its usefulness, but in order to dispose it, to put it forward, to present it. Art as “a productive technique of presence” extracts the thing from its passing, from its contingency, it poses it before us, with all its necessity, i.e. absolutely. In quite Hegelian terms Nancy formulates the nature of time as the negativity of the passing: « The present in time is nothing: it is pure time, the pure present of time, and thus its pure presence, that is, the negativity of the passing ». According to Nancy, On Kawara’s question then would be “how this inexposable [the passing of time] can be exposed”. This question brings us back to Bergson: it is no more possible, after Bergson, to simply intrude into time’s intimate structure, divide, measure and compare different time spans as if we were dealing with spatial

² J.-L. Nancy, *Technique du present. Essai sur On Kawara*, Paris, 1999. In English: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/nancy.html>

representations. There is a general ban on “representing” (=spatializing) time that is gradually taken into account not only by philosophers, but by artists themselves. That is why Nancy is extremely cautious. He admits that “the present of presence is not in time”, as temporality and constant passing, but it is « within it, not in its course, but in its most intimate heart or hollow ». He distinguishes between temporality and pure time, refusing to describe the latter as a type of spatialized time as Bergson would claim it to be. He nevertheless gives credit to space, conceiving of it as of that, which « opens time », « distends it », puts it forward, instead of re-presenting it. Space does not re-present time (by means of a line, for instance, if we take Bergson’s favorite image), it *opens* it. Space is the origin of time: « it is simultaneously its point of nullity and the whole extension of its successivity ». “Absolute spacing” is equivalent to creation in art³. On Kawara, thus, elaborates a technique to disclose the spacing of time.

Let’s take a look on On Kawara’s art. He deals with the question of time/present and presence by creating a series of works known under the name of *Date paintings* or *Today* series. In one hall we can see only dates: simple numbers, numerals, printed in white font on black background. Anonymous dates, collection of a considerable number of years in the artist’s practice. “On Kawara exposes the recollection of humanity past and humanity yet to come, subtracted from memory and expectation”, argues Nancy. In another hall the dates are exposed with the corresponding events beneath: for example, *July 21, 1969*, the date of the first moon landing. Nancy interprets it as an opening of a new era, as a new space. This painting does not simply signify the man’s conquest of space, it does not re-present this event, but points out “the origin or center of all spacing”, “space’s request of man”. In yet another hall, the canvases are painted in red, they mark certain events (Vietnam war), and stick out almost as sacred, as put aside of everything else, isolated, “cut-out spaces”. Time, in those dates, is not exposed regarding its duration, but exclusively regarding its occurrences. The canvas is the date that I read on it, that I pronounce. It is present only when I re-actualize it, over and over again.

When Bergson says that the same instinct (instinct of living in duration, being future and action oriented) makes us open up *space* before us and close *time* behind us as it goes by, he seems actually expressing a similar intuition: space does open time, but it opens it not absolutely – at least in this case, and as opposed to art - but only with a view to arriving future. Art inverts those relations: space opens time and extracts the present from passing, saving it from the future; hence, once opened, time is retained under our gaze, despite its falling into the past. “Tautological painting of the date makes the date what it is: a pure datum, with no other reference”, argues Nancy. This is a form of abstraction that persists in contemporary art, and is

³ The expression “spacing of time” (*espacement*) belongs to Jacques Derrida. The procedure of temporalisation, for instance “differAnce” et “espacement” in Derrida).

known by the name of minimalism or conceptual art (the label attached to On Kawara). Bringing into presence is ab-stracting from the past and the future, sub-stracting from the flow of temporality.

Using On Kawara's example, Nancy explains the functioning of the present, showing how the artist stages it in his paintings. The painting fulfills its role of exposing the present in several ways: 1) as being present only once, on this particular date that it figures 2) as conserving the date across time, « the immobile repeated acute present of a vanished present », it does not last continuously in time, but always repeats itself, when the date on the painting is seen, read, pronounced 3) as being « autoreferential », i. e. having no contents other than itself 4) as presenting the “date” like an encounter, when the spectator is seeing the painting for the first time : « I am the staring present of the presentation. I am the place of the date [...]” 5) as deleting the date: “the date does not date anymore, is eternalized by the *Date painting*. For this reason it multiplies it indefinitely: the erasing is infinite because it is still on the date that the date erases itself. On the date of the painting - the day itself – but also the date of each reexposition of the painting”.

Those different regimes of the present, as a given, as presence, are brought to light in those paintings. They make us experience the present as it *is*, in its passing within the time, and in its autonomous nature. As Nancy puts it: “Such is the logic of the present: at this precise moment, the moment erases itself, and this is how it is a moment”. Thus, what is put forward in On Kawara's art is not the continuous Bergsonian present – this moment that does not exist separately in the time flow, “le présent pur étant l'insaisissable progrès du passé rongéant l'avenir »⁴ – but the present as the *moment*, as a present moment. Hence the destructive nature of the present, it brings up the presence, opens it in a spacing, but never gives it as an object: “the present opposes presence: it ruins it, abducts it, in the same movement by which it brings it ».

All these considerations lead to a metaphysical and ontological dimension: “The spacing of a point which is nonetheless not the spacing between two points. A single distended point: not the infinite divisibility of space, but the division of the indivisible product of all division. The non-dimension as distention”. The origin of art (as of a new time order) is in the present, but it is hardly possible outside art, to take it into account, and actually make it “be”. That is why, argues Nancy, the present exists only in art. It is pure creation of the art as a technique.

But there is even more to it, and that is what Nancy does not focus on: On Kawara's project pretends less to solve the problem of time's “presentification”, but brings to light inextricable time paradoxes. Despite the overall character of the project: its repetitiveness, its

⁴ *Matière et mémoire*, p. 167.

realization following a strict protocol, in almost automatic manner, so as to dismiss every trait of originality and creativeness, it also points at a singular artistic experience. The date refers to a unique day, as it was lived and experienced by the painter himself, even though he doesn't let us learn anything specific about this experience. Each date is equally a *trace*, not only of the time passing, but also of the time past⁵. "The very idea of a 'trace' betrays its fragility"⁶, as it indicates the loss, the disappearance of the experience it evokes. The dating marks then a bond between universal and particular, between the ever coming present and the persistence of the past. This observation even makes Daniel Buren in his essay on On Kawara argue: "it is the 'present' that speaks only of the past"⁷. We are now able to say that all this experiential dimension of art dismissed by Nancy appears nonetheless powerfully, whenever we ask the question of what is behind the date, what it shows us without explicitly saying it. Thus, the problem exposed in On Kawara's *Date paintings* is more complex: it is not only about *creating* the present as such, and setting up transcendental conditions of possibility of this present, but also about the consequences of this creation, since the present will be inevitably interpreted as the present of a past (trace).

We now need to distinguish between two concepts of the present: the pure present claimed by Nancy in his interpretation of On Kawara's works, and the present closely intertwined with the past – yet another path for reflection that On Kawara's art makes possible. Let us turn to Bergson in order to articulate these two seemingly antagonistic concepts of the present.

2. The Suspended Present

We can find in Bergson at least three definitions of the present:

1° the present in the literal sense of the word: nature (or matter) is present, as it only repeats itself indefinitely: "l'avenir des images doit être contenu dans leur présent et n'y rien ajouter de nouveau"⁸. The present that is independent both from the memory and from expectation, from the past and from the future. This present is inaccessible to man. And this is the present that On Kawara attempts to think and to paint, according to Nancy.

2° the present which is part of duration, a living present: « présent réel, concret, vécu, celui dont je parle quand je parle de ma perception présente, celui-là occupe nécessairement une

⁵ According to Bergson, "l'essence" de tous "les événements et détails de notre vie" "est d'avoir une date et par conséquent de ne se reproduire jamais". Cf. *Matière et mémoire*, Paris, PUF, p. 88.

⁶ Susan Stewart, "Annal and Existence: On Kawara's Date Inscriptions", in *On Kawara – Silence*, Guggenheim, 2015, p. 173.

⁷ Daniel Buren, "A Moment's Footprint", in: *On Kawara – Silence*, Guggenheim, 2015, p. 211.

⁸ *Matière et mémoire*, p. 11.

durée»⁹. This present alone can exist. It is an imperceptible conjunction between the past and the future. The artistic operation on time interferes with this living temporal order of our natural life in order to understand and to seize the complex nature of time: present and yet already altogether passed (and past) – another On Kawara’s objective.

3° ideal, philosophical present (the concept of the present): an indivisible limit separating the past from the future. « l’instant où le temps s’écoule ». « Mais il ne peut être question ici d’un instant mathématique. Sans doute il y a un présent idéal, purement conçu, limite indivisible qui séparerait le passé de l’avenir »¹⁰. But if I have to think of a present moment, goes Bergson, I think of it in terms of the future, not in terms of the past. « Si je pouvais fixer cet indivisible présent, cet élément infinitésimal de la courbe du temps, c’est la direction de l’avenir qu’il montrerait »¹¹. By this concept, we think basically the progression in time.

There is yet another occurrence of this term in Bergson’s work. It is never formulated explicitly, but this present is extracted from duration, as it is not prolonged into the future. It is a suspended present, present that does not pass. In order to explore this form of the present (that can get us closer to the artistic experience), I would like to comment on a series of texts, quite often neglected (despite their tight connection to *Matter and Memory*). Some of those texts are assembled in a collection of articles called *Spiritual Energy* and published in 1919. I will engage especially with two of them: “Le rêve” (1901), “Le souvenir du présent et la Fausse reconnaissance” (1908). Some others, also in dialogue with *Matter and Memory*, as “The Perception of Change” (1911) are part of another collection of articles *La Pensée et le mouvant?* (1934) All of them are written much later than *Matter and memory*, but it is yet another proof of the importance of certain recurrent problems in Bergson’s thought. Those problems revolve basically around memory and certain anomalies in its functioning.

We know Bergson’s statement: our being future-bound, action oriented, prevents us from paying attention to our present, to what is happening to us at the moment, to our lived experience. Duration reveals itself thematically only when the time suddenly and inadvertently is diverted from its regular course, when we actually suspend it in order to experiment it. The paradox is still there: we need to experience time without actually stopping it, without breaking its continuity. But whenever we try to analyze our experience, we distort it, we transform time into space, movement into immobility, individual and singular into general. But there are certainly some experimental situations in which time’s structure makes itself spontaneously visible. Bergson enumerates at least three of them: sleep, false recognition (« déjà-vu ») and near death

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

experience (*vision hypermnésique des mourants*). All those situations are characterized by their disinterest in the future, which makes them similar to esthetic experience. What happens when future is out of reach for us? Do we manage then better to capture the present moment? We can find in Bergson two different answers to this question. When we dream, we are immersed in a state of perfect passivity, we are isolated from action and our everyday life. Whenever we stop acting, when daydreaming, for instance: “notre moi s'éparpille; notre passé, qui jusque-là se ramassait sur lui-même dans l'impulsion indivisible qu'il nous communiquait, se décompose en mille et mille souvenirs qui s'extériorisent les uns par rapport aux autres. Ils renoncent à s'entre-pénétrer à mesure qu'ils se figent davantage. Notre personnalité redescend ainsi dans la direction de l'espace »¹². Without the directing dimension of the future, seems to say Bergson, the temporal tissu of our life somehow dismantles itself, we abandon duration and find ourselves in our past presented as pure spatiality. Our present does not fit into the flow of time (duration), but it is no pure autonomous present either, it changes its natures, as it gets spatialized sinking further into distraction.

« Dejà-vu » is also the result of a certain disinterested position *vis-à-vis* life. This strange feeling, that everything we are experiencing right now, has already occurred to us before, compromises our relation to the future as always unpredictable, new. Given that we think we know exactly what is going to happen, we do not need to act anymore. We become spectators of our own actions that seem to us inevitable, as if we had a split personality, composed of two subjects: one is acting automatically, another one is observing these actions. The consciousness becomes a place of imaginary shift of different temporal moments: one that occupies ideally the present moment, the other precedes it in time, as if it were already in the future, and anticipates it. This illusion helps Bergson prove his major thesis on the simultaneous formation of two temporal flows: that of the present and that of the past. Perception (present) and memory (souvenir) are two sides of the same present moment. But in normal conditions, the past moment of the present is instantly rejected into the past. It means that the past has never been in the present, it is not a memory of some past perception. Perception and memory are completely different phenomena right from the start. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson claims: « Nous prétendons que *la formation du souvenir n'est jamais postérieure à celle de la perception; elle en est contemporaine* »¹³. The « déjà-vu » illusion reveals the memory of the present as the accompanying moment of every present. So, according to Bergson, every perception is not only situated in the present, but already in the past. There is no pure present is such, even at « the very beginning », there is no « mathematical point » where the present is only present and nothing else. But the

¹² *L'Évolution créatrice*, pp. 202-203.

¹³ *Matière et mémoire*, p. 124.

apparition of the « souvenir du présent » is also due to the abrupt elimination of the future. The stop of our propensity for the future presents the current moment as if it was a picture or a dream. The split perception, hesitating between the present and the past, « c'est du passé quant à la forme et du présent quant à la matière »¹⁴. This present is almost spatialized, but not completely: spatialized in form (split in two moments), but not in its contents (continuous).

“La vision hypermnésique des mourants” is the specific object of Georges Poulet’s essay *Bergson. Le thème de la vision panoramique des mourants et la juxtaposition*. This experience that we also know under the name of near death experience happens to people who are about to undergo a violent death : by hanging, or drowning, for example. By comparing two passages of Bergson, one from *Matter and Memory*, the other from “The Perception of Change”, Poulet points out the evolution that undergoes the interpretation of the hypermnésia question in the works of Bergson. In *Matter and Memory* we read: « le sujet, revenu à la vie, déclare avoir vu défiler devant lui, en peu de temps, tous les événements oubliés de son histoire, avec leurs plus infimes circonstances et dans l'ordre même où ils s'étaient produits. Un être humain qui rêverait son existence au lieu de la vivre tiendrait sans doute ainsi sous son regard, à tout moment, la multitude infinie des détails de son histoire passé »¹⁵. Bergson suggests the proximity between the near death experience and that of the dreamer, provided that in the first case the situation of detachment is absolute. But what about the other features of this state? How does the past appear, successively or simultaneously? There is succession, because events appear "in the order in which they occurred." But how this succession is organized, Bergson does not specify it any further. What kind of "multiplicity" is it? That of the juxtaposition or that of the interpenetration? According to *Matter and Memory* and to other texts connected to it, this multiplicity is quantitative, a panorama, which is time transformed into space. Indeed, all Bergson’s observations during this period, around *Matter and Memory*, evoke the same motif: loss of attention to life, resulting in the dispersion of our ‘self’ in the past. That past is present in the form of distinct multiplicity of juxtaposed details and not as the interpenetration and fusion of duration.

However, in 1911 Bergson seems to offer a different resolution to this question :

Une attention à la vie qui serait suffisamment puissante, et suffisamment dégagée de tout intérêt pratique, embrasserait ainsi dans un présent indivisé l'histoire passée tout entière de la personne consciente, – non pas comme de l'instantané, non pas comme un ensemble de parties simultanées, mais comme du continuellement présent qui serait aussi du continuellement mouvant : telle, je le répète, la mélodie qu'on perçoit indivisible, et qui constitue d'un bout à l'autre, si l'on veut étendre le sens du mot, un perpétuel présent, quoique cette perpétuité n'ait rien de commun avec l'immutabilité, ni cette indivisibilité avec l'instantanéité. Il s'agit d'un présent qui dure.

¹⁴ *L'Energie spirituelle*, p. 137.

¹⁵ *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 171-172.

Ce n'est pas là une hypothèse. Il arrive, dans des cas exceptionnels, que l'attention renonce tout à coup à l'intérêt qu'elle prenait à la vie : aussitôt, comme par enchantement, le passé redevient présent. Chez des personnes qui voient surgir devant elles, à l'improviste, la menace d'une mort soudaine, chez l'alpiniste qui glisse au fond d'un précipice, chez des noyés et chez des pendus, il semble qu'une conversion brusque de l'attention puisse se produire, – quelque chose comme un changement d'orientation de la conscience qui, jusqu'alors tournée vers l'avenir et absorbée par les nécessités de l'action, subitement s'en désintéresse. Cela suffit pour que mille et mille détails « oubliés » soient remémorés, pour que l'histoire entière de la personne se déroule devant elle en un mouvant panorama¹⁶.

What is striking in this text, that I wished for this reason to quote *in extenso*, is that the past becomes absolutely and completely present, coincides with it or takes its place, and still, without any future opening, is capable of living in the continuous flow of duration. As if it repeated itself, but not in a dissipated, picture-like panorama, a simultaneous vision, but in its temporal integrity. The vision of the dying is a form of attention to life and not, as it was said before, its dissipation. Bergson gives the last chance to our « self » to get back together all its life forces, but not in order to fight for the life itself, but to re-live it once again intensively.

These three experiences give us each a different version of the present, as pivotal dimension of the time. The state of sleep, while mobilizing imagination, is still close to spatial representation, since imagination circulates freely and disorderly between different layers of memory and perception. The present is passive and loosely related to the environment. In “déjà-vu” phenomenon, the experience is esthetically much more interesting and can be experimentally induced¹⁷: the same moment holds two dimensions, two plans: memory *and* perception, past *and* present. And finally, in the hypermnesic vision, the past is completely integrated into the present,

¹⁶ *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 170.

¹⁷ Bergson se propose de rapporter une expérience personnelle : sa tentative de provoquer en soi quelque chose de proche de ce qu'on appelle le sentiment du déjà-vu. Car si on connaît bien les conditions dans lesquelles il se fait sentir, on n'a qu'à simuler cette situation : « Nous ne sommes pas sujet à la fausse reconnaissance, mais nous avons essayé, bien souvent, depuis que nous l'étudions, de nous replacer dans l'état d'âme décrit par les observateurs et d'induire expérimentalement en nous le phénomène. Nous n'y avons jamais réussi tout à fait ; nous avons pourtant obtenu, à diverses reprises, quelque chose d'approchant, mais de très fuyant. Il faut pour cela que nous nous trouvions en présence d'une scène, non seulement nouvelle pour nous, mais qui tranche sur le cours de notre vie habituelle. Ce sera, par exemple, un spectacle auquel nous assistons en voyage, surtout si le voyage a été improvisé. La première condition est alors que nous éprouvions un certain étonnement tout particulier, que j'appellerai l'étonnement de se trouver là. Sur cet étonnement vient se greffer un sentiment assez différent, qui a pourtant une parenté avec lui : le sentiment que l'avenir est clos, que la situation est détachée de tout mais que nous sommes attachés à elle. À mesure que ces deux émotions se compénètrent, la réalité perd de sa solidité et notre perception du présent tend aussi à se doubler de quelque autre chose, qui serait derrière. Est-ce le « souvenir du présent » qui transparaît ? Nous n'oserions l'affirmer ; mais il semble bien que nous soyons alors sur le chemin de la fausse reconnaissance, et qu'il y aurait peu de chose à faire pour y arriver » (*L'Energie spirituelle*, pp. 149-150).

Cf. *Wordsworth W. Literary Reminiscences* Boston, 1851 T I P 308–309 : « I have remarked, from my earliest days, that, if under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now my ear was placed upon the stretch, in order to catch any sound of wheels ... At the very instant when I raised my head from the ground, in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing: from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness, fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the Infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances».

or precisely it replaces the present. In other words, the past performs the “spacing of time”, makes present visible and fulfils it completely as a perfect expression of one’s entire life.

In those three cases, Bergson manages to figure time, to objectivize it in the situations where its flow can be interrupted, sojourned, suspended. All those operations are carried out through loosening of the ties with the future. Action, and direction towards the future accelerates time, makes it pass and certainly gives meaning to this passage. Without this meaning, this precise orientation, we get to experience the inner structure of time, as presentification of the present through the past. And what is more, this objectivation does not necessarily result into spatialisation, as the last example shows it clearly.

The technique of producing the present is legitimate not only in the case of conceptual art, investigating different potentialities of the present as such, but also as regards Bergson himself, who tries to preserve the present from the passing, from the flow of time. Bergson is eager to explore some out of ordinary situations as experimental ones and go to the end of his thought experiment. The idea of spacing in contemporary French philosophy can be tracked back to Bergson, since the attitude of “thinking in duration”, advocated by Bergson, implies as well a creation of a new observation point within the time itself. Going beyond Bergson’s argument, French philosophers, as Derrida or Nancy, are aware of its limits and their Heideggerian legacy is here more crucial. In order to think time, the idea that Bergson would never dare to admit – one has to abandon some of its features (as it naturally happens in Bergson’s examples cited above), and in our case – the future, first of all, the direction of the time arrow, so to say. And in the case of art, as we saw it with On Kawara, it succeeds in capturing the pure present in quite an ambiguous way, and not without any relationship to the past either. Thanks to the comparison with Bergson, we see more clearly why one has to preserve the past. Because only it guarantees the subjectivity of our experience. Even if the artist deals with the anonymous subject – any spectator – and refers to a date that was lived by millions of people, and even if he wishes to reduce himself to a simple coming to presence of his routine act of painting – even then he won’t be completely successful. By giving to perceive something that does not have to be comprehended, felt, experienced – a simple date, he probably wants the perception itself to be simple, instantaneous, plane. And yet, as far as the aesthetic experience goes, the essence of time lies in its paradoxical nature, that we know since St. Augustine and that Bergson tried to conceptualize through his idea of duration. The force of On Kawara’s project is in the way he manages to identify the rift in time: it’s presentification, its pure presence, extracted from its flow, the unconditional, which is condition of its split into present, future and past; and its

simultaneously being the past (as shows ‘d  ja-vu’ experience in Bergson): the present and the past are created at the same time – and that is what On Kawara’s artistic experiment shows¹⁸.

The fragility of the present, both in Bergson and on Kawara, lies truly in its finite character, since it can only be accomplished, fulfilled, sustained by the past (as shown in the extreme case of near-death hypermnesic vision). On Kawara’s work carries out a twofold experiment on time and its nature: aiming at the prevalence of the present in a conceptual, abstract, “objective” construction/creation of time, it nonetheless has to deal with the past and its prevalence, whenever we speak about “subjective”, personal perception of an artwork. The possibility of the latter both shatters the merely “conceptual” ambition of the project, and fruitfully reinforces it, both from philosophical and artistic point of view.

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This article benefitted from a fellowship at the Paris Institute for Advanced Studies (France), with the financial support of the French State managed by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, programme “Investissements d’avenir”, (ANR-11-LABX-0027-01 Labex RFIEA+).

¹⁸ Of course, my interpretation does not pretend to be exhaustive, as it places the work of On Kawara in a strictly Western cultural context, and within the movement of American conceptual art. It would be exciting to pursue this research, in order to explore exactly in what way the artist could be indebted to the oriental and specifically Japanese perception of time.