

## On Kawara

*Thanatophanies*, 1995

Manifestations of death

From 1952 to 1956, Kawara painted highly graphic works in a style akin to surrealism. Postwar Japanese art—and especially art following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—shifted toward a “social realism” capable of expressing the horrors of World War II in a way that traditional aesthetics, rooted in harmony, could no longer.

A teenager in 1945, On Kawara was deeply scarred by the tragedy into which the nuclear bombings plunged his country. The *Thanatophanies* series is a portfolio derived from a collection of graphite drawings created by the artist in 1955–56, which were intended for a book, *Portraits of Japanese People*, that was never published. With *Thanatophanies*, On Kawara lays death bare. These “apparitions of death,” with no regard for the repressed or taboos, call for an “awakening of consciousness” and a “prayer of existence” (On Kawara). For the artist, death is also a force, an apparition as much as a disappearance. Properly invisible, it mingles here with the animated expressions of these faces where the blood has ceased to flow but which remain imbued with humanity.