



JUNE 1, 1967

Kasper König as an Icon of His Era

On Kawara:
June 1, 1967 (detail)
Acrylic on canvas
26 × 33 cm, Written
Art Collection
(Provenance Kasper
König)

It all began, as is almost self-evident now, about 60 years ago. Andy Warhol opened his *Silver Factory* on the Lower East Side of New York. Donald Judd wrote his now-legendary essay, "Specific Objects," after an exhibition of cadmium red floor and wall works at the *Green Gallery*. Walter De Maria, who was at one point a drummer for the *Velvet Underground*, met the collector Robert Scull, who funded artistic concepts from the artist's notebook of ideas. As a result, in 1964, De Maria designed the "Mile Long Parallel Walls in the Desert," the first major project of Land Art. **Many artists, including Yayoi Kusama, one of the few women among them, were searching for new, larger and more real spaces at the time. For them, stylized painting and sculpture, as well as the educational use of art from Europe, faded into the background.** Kasper König (1944–2024) from Mettingen knew these and other artists well; he lived in New York for some years from 1965 onward. He was active on many fronts. As a former intern of Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne and Robert Fraser in London, he had some gallery experience. He studied anthropology at the *New School for Social Research*. Together with Pontus Hultén, he prepared an Andy Warhol retrospective for the *Moderna Museet* in Stockholm in 1968. To the Düsseldorf artist and aspiring gallerist Konrad Fischer, König appeared as the ideal advisor. That was in 1967. Fischer wanted to start a small but impactful art space; after all he had studied alongside Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke at the Academy. König encouraged Fischer: "The chances looks pretty good to me. You are superior to West Germany's small-minded gallerists..." **König organized the exhibition's debut with radical works by Carl Andre. He also established contacts with Richard Artschwager, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, and On Kawara. That turning point in the era, felt across Europe, was not solely due to König, but certainly to the almost extreme affinity of Western European galleries and museums for American art.** Peter Ludwig and Karl Ströher acquired particularly large collections of American Pop Art before 1970. Carl Andre's work of 100 steel plates, covering the entire floor of Fischer's small gallery, entered König's collection in 1968. König later passed it on to the *Giuseppe Panza di Biumo collection* in Varese. Within a few months, the *Galleria Sperone* in Turin bought other works by Andre from 1967, and two versions were acquired by the *Galerie Friedrich* in Munich, one of which went to the *Kunstmuseum Basel*. The *Staatgalerie Stuttgart* also acquired one of Andre's works early on.

Fischer, who in September 1967 was still steeped in correspondence, worries, and dreams, found leading private collectors, galleries, and museums that immediately showed interest in Andre's work, for example the *Sammlung Ludwig* in Cologne, the *Sammlung Ströher* in Darmstadt, and the *Haus Lange* Museum in Krefeld. By 1968, exhibitions followed in Mönchengladbach, Munich, and Antwerp. **Thus a culture of taste shaped by Minimal and Conceptual Art was born like a giant baby. Harald Szeemann, who quickly gained fame as a curator and later as the organizer of *documenta*, made use of König's always generously open address book for his 1969 exhibition "Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form" in Bern.** When König organized the highly refreshing exhibition "Westkunst. Contemporary Art Since 1939" at the Cologne Trade Fair building in 1981, with a catalogue written by Laszlo Glozer, the graphic designer Klaus Staeck distributed cigarette packs of the "West" brand, each adorned with stickers that read "Kunst" (Art). He went on to criticize the project as "a joint product of the construction industry, transport companies, the insurance industry, and the art trade," all for the purpose of staking "an imperial claim." The Hamburg museum director Werner Hofmann fumed in a six-page review that neither the title nor the selection of 900 works was justified. Instead, he saw uncertainty and arbitrariness at play. Regarding the educational effort, he accused the organizers of talking to themselves in the jargon of insiders. It was to no avail. König, as well as Fischer and others committed to the latest contemporary art at the time, naturally knew that the number of interested people could be increased through education and entertainment. As Fischer dryly admitted in 1971, it sweetened the bitter medicine. The art itself was not entertaining for them. Their priority was to "inform the family" early on. Eight hundred people attended Kasper König's funeral on August 29, 2024, in Berlin. Many of them knew each other. Almost all had worked with him at least once, some even very frequently. There were many stages in his sometimes inconspicuously fruitful career: The exhibition series "Skulptur Projekte Münster" that started in 1977, the major exhibition "Von hier aus" in 1984 in Düsseldorf, the numerous presentations of emerging artists at *Portikus* through his presidency at the *Städelschule* in Frankfurt am Main, fourteen years of rich work as director of the *Ludwig Museum* in Cologne, another major exhibition in Vienna, and a *Manifesta* in St. Petersburg. **When we look at today's exhibitions and the art markets with numerous contemporary auctions, we find that the number of participants has grown to many hundreds of thousands. What were once like-minded people, albeit in competition, has become an anonymous mass that hardly ever experiences closeness to great artists.** This is the unforgettable achievement of this epochal figure: König was almost excessively their discoverer and promoter. As their mediator and facilitator, he accompanied many of them intelligently and faithfully, often also with restraint. He also donated a substantial part of his collection to the *Museum Ludwig*.

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