

ARTFORUM

July 25, 2017

John Giorno: 500 Words

by Alex Jovanovich



View of “Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno,” Sky Art, 2017. Photo: Daniel Pérez.

Ugo Rondinone’s massive project “I ♥ John Giorno” is a love letter to the titular poet—and Rondinone’s husband—which originally opened in 2015 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris before coming to New York this summer. The exhibition, a major retrospective of John Giorno’s work, is also a homage, with contributions from artists such as Billy Sullivan, Verne Dawson, Elizabeth Peyton, Anne Collier, and Judith Eisler. “I ♥ John Giorno” is spread across twelve institutions throughout the city, including the Swiss Institute, Red Bull Arts New York, New York University’s 80WSE Gallery, the Kitchen, and White Columns. Here, Giorno talks about the making of the show.

I LEARNED EARLY ON FROM THE BEATS, such as Allen Ginsburg and William Burroughs—and the Pop artists too—that archives were very important. This was around the late 1950s, or the beginning of the ’60s. So, I just saved all of my work. My parents had a house in Roslyn Heights, Long Island, and for fifty years I brought everything I made there for safekeeping. After my parents died, Ugo surveyed what I’d stored—he wanted to turn it into a project. This was around 2000. And then in 2003 we saw the Jean Cocteau retrospective at the Centre Pompidou—which was so brilliant and totally great. Ugo questioned what an archive for public consumption could look like, and his idea for the show developed over the course of fifteen years. It’s shocking the way that everything sort of miraculously happened. Every element managed to come together and flourish.

The New York show is different from the one in Paris simply because there's more room here. Some really important things get to see the light of day, like the AIDS Treatment Project—at Hunter College's 205 Hudson Street Gallery—which I started in 1984 to help people sick with the disease pay for their rent, medicine, transportation, anything they needed. Musicians like Debbie Harry, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, and Hüsker Dü performed at the Beacon Theater to raise funds for the project. All the posters explaining what the AIDS Treatment Project did, to encourage people to help, are there on display. Peter Ungerleider's great film *Loving Kindness* is playing there as well. It's a movie about the project and the absolute horror of that time. My personal Tibetan Buddhist shrine is also on display at Hudson Street, in a shrine room with twenty ancient thangkas borrowed from the Rubin Museum of Art. For the Palais de Tokyo show, we borrowed twenty ancient thangkas from the Musée Guimet.

The exhibition is really Ugo's creation. We've been together for twenty years. We sleep together every night—when you've been sleeping with somebody for that long, you know their mind. He's taken everything that I've done and turned it into one massive work of art, and he's allowed everything I've made to take another step forward. All of the people who've contributed to it have transformed it as well—Rirkrit Tiravanija, Michael Stipe, Matthew Higgs, Pierre Huyghe, and Angela Bulloch, among others. The show has evolved since it was in Paris, as it's being presented across multiple New York venues that are collaborating together for the first time, and that's extraordinarily wonderful. I have the good fortune to watch it all take shape.

I'm not really overly cautious about what I think my story is. It's silly to be overprotective of one's own history, isn't it? If you go and try changing something, it always backfires. Ugo's presented my life, but not in a way that's nailed down. Things are still changing—it's always shifting. Though, it was extraordinary to see all these images, books, and other things I haven't thought about or looked at in ages as the show was being put together. The photographs of my family I hadn't seen since I was fifteen years old! Taking all that in can make it feel like your life's a slide show, or a stop-frame movie that's eighty years long.

But I have written a take on my own life—everyone has a take on their own life, right? It's almost done, at about 680 pages. I've been working on it for more than twenty years. The last chapter is going to be about Ugo and the Paris and New York shows, but I haven't written it yet. The reason the book's taken so long is that I never kept diaries. I've kept appointment journals, and those can be useful for placing certain events. It's all just memory. I can remember conversations from fifty years ago. It is a long process that involves allowing the memory to come back. It generally begins by remembering what I said, and over the course of some days I remember what was said between myself and someone else. Whenever there is an important event I want to remember, this is the process. Then I embellish the dialogue with descriptions of that moment. There are eighty-page chapters on Andy Warhol; Bob Rauschenberg; Jasper Johns; William Burroughs; Ugo; being a Tibetan Buddhist in the Nyingma Tradition; and being a poet and artist. The book is going to be called *Great Demon Kings*.



Excerpt from John Giorno's interview for 500 Words.

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