

ARTSY

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Why Everyone Loves Poet, Warhol Muse, and Underground Hero John Giorno

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UGO RONDINONE: I LOVE JOHN GIORNO, John Giorno's Dial-A-Poem, 1970.
Photo by Gianfranco Mantegna. ©John Giorno, Courtesy of John Giorno Archive.

Before reading this piece, I'd like you to make a phone call. Just do it: (641) 793-8122. After one ring, a sonorous voice will greet you on the other end of the line. It might belong to Patti Smith or Allen Ginsberg or David Byrne. They won't listen to you. Instead, they'll read you a poem.

In 1969, when poet and artist John Giorno first introduced this unconventional hotline, which he dubbed "Dial-a-Poem," it received 1,112,237 calls in its first four-and-a-half months. "The busiest time was 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., so one figured that all those people sitting at desks in New York office buildings spend a lot of time on the telephone," Giorno once quipped. Since then, the number you call has changed (it was originally 212-628-0400), but the impact of the piece remains resolutely the same: to bring a vast range of radical artists together in one place; offer up a platform for their most transgressive, heady work; and deliver it to as many people as possible.

A similarly generous spirit has defined both Giorno's long life (he recently turned 80) and his uncommonly influential art practice. Both are spotlighted this summer in a 13-venue exhibition in New York, at venues like The Kitchen, the New Museum, and Artists Space. It doubles as sprawling artwork conceived by artist Ugo Rondinone, Giorno's partner of two decades (a condensed version of the project was first presented at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2015). The show spreads examples of Giorno's poetry, paintings, and influence across his hometown of New York, embedding it in small and large art spaces, animating performance venues, and filling glass window displays on Broadway. It's fittingly titled "I ♥ John Giorno," alluding to the outsized impact that the artist has had on the city's creative landscape over the past 60 years.

When I speak with Giorno by phone from his legendary loft on the Bowery, “I ♥ John Giorno” has recently opened. The artist is in a state of awe. “I know I lived this life, I know I made this work,” he says, in the honeyed lilt familiar from public readings of his poems. “But the fact that it’s all miraculously arisen, in all these spaces in the city where I’ve lived for so long, amazes me.”

It’s not hard to be blown away by the ambitious enterprise, which surfaces a voluminous cache of works by Giorno, alongside projects by a huge number of fellow artists who were moved by them. This latter group spans generations and artistic movements, between which Giorno has always fluidly glided. He has been at the heart of a daunting number of historical moments, from the Beat scene to Andy Warhol’s Factory and the genesis of Pop art, which he helped launch. Giorno was also integral in forging the 1970s and ’80s avant-garde scene at CBGB and Judson Church, where he wove together a mixture of rock and spoken-word performance. From 1982 until 1989, Giorno’s eponymous band used his poems as a jumping off point for experimental music. In the 1990s and 2000s, he began focusing on what he called “Poetry Paintings”: canvases that whittled his long, lyrical verses down to persuasive, passionate mandates.

Despite the breadth of his career, poetry has always remained the core of Giorno’s practice, and its power is on full display in a video that loops at Sky Art. We see the artist performing a 2006 work, *THANX 4 NOTHING*: a confessional of sorts, and also an abbreviated autobiography, penned 11 years ago on his 70th birthday.

In it, Giorno, barefoot, lists his life’s many hedonistic pleasures and chafing pains, and then metaphorically gives them back to all his friends: “I want to give my thanks to everyone for everything, and as a token of my appreciation, I want to offer back to you all my good and bad habits as magnificent priceless jewels, wish-fulfilling gems satisfying everything you need and want.” He invites readers to smoke a joint with his good friend and former roommate William Burroughs, and have “totally great sex” with his lovers “Bob” (Rauschenberg), “Jasper” (Johns), and “Ugo” (Rondinone).

The spirit of *THANX 4 NOTHING*, which vigorously harnesses the richness of life (both its vertiginous highs and lows) then gifts them to others, runs through Giorno’s entire practice. His paintings, on view at the Rubin Museum, NYU’s 80WSE gallery, and Red Bull Arts New York, among other venues, reflect the same honest, generous energy. They’re alternately inspirational and rawly sexual: “YOU GOT TO BURN TO SHINE,” “IT’S NOT WHAT HAPPENS, IT’S HOW YOU HANDLE IT,” and “I WANT TO CUM IN YOUR HEART.”

What makes “I ♥ John Giorno” most insightful is its insistence on the importance of the artist’s impact and network. The Swiss Institute, for instance, is completely devoted to Giorno’s collaborations with his friend and lover, Warhol. During the 1960s, Giorno played muse to the Pop god in various films, 10 of which are on view here. Across them, Giorno joyously flies a kite with Robert Indiana (*Untitled (John in Country)*, 1963), washes dishes in the buff (*John Washing*, 1963), and sleeps angelically for five hours and 21 minutes (*Warhol’s legendary Sleep*, 1963).

That influence extends to younger artists, too, some of whom weren’t even alive when Giorno got his start. Pierre Huyghe riffed on *Sleep* in a 1998 video, *Sleeptalking*, which superimposes his own footage of the artist sleeping (shot when Giorno was in his early sixties) over Warhol’s video from over 30 years prior. Giorno has also been a frequent portrait subject for diverse painters—from Elizabeth Peyton to Billy Sullivan, Verne Dawson, and Judith Eisler—and captured on film by the likes of Michael Stipe and Rirkrit Tiravanija. And Giorno’s most iconic project continues to inspire: Young poet and artist

Janani Balasubramanian will perform “iOS-a-Poem,” a version of “Dial-a-Poem” updated for the digital age.

“I ♥ John Giorno” traces a vital facet of the artist’s output at White Columns, where the non-profit is focusing on the record label, Giorno Poetry Systems (GPS), that he founded in 1965 in order to bring poetry into the vernacular popular culture. He also saw the project as a direct response to the political climate of the time, and an act of resistance against the Vietnam War and the government’s ever-mounting conservatism. “At this point, with the war and the repression and everything, we thought this was a good way for the Movement to reach people,” he wrote, in the sleeve of the 1972 anthology double-album Dial-a-Poem-Poets.

Giorno published more than 50 records, cassettes, CDs, and videos via the GPS imprint with the likes of John Cage, Patti Smith, and Keith Haring. He also used it as a platform for AIDS activism. Under the project’s umbrella, Giorno began the AIDS Treatment Project in 1984, an organization that helped raise funds to support the lives of artists suffering from the disease.

Ephemera documenting the effort, along with wall-sized prints of related poems by Giorno, paper the interior of the Hunter College Art Gallery at 205 Hudson Street. One floor-to-ceiling mural broadcasts the AIDS Treatment Project’s mission: “Treat a complete stranger as a lover, hug them as good friends, as they are or as 10 years ago you might have had fabulous sex with absolute abandon with the same stranger. Now life is ravaged and we offer love from the same root of boundless compassion.” Compassion is a consistent motif in Giorno’s work, and a quality he cultivates as a longtime student of Tibetan Buddhism. In the gallery, also on view is Giorno’s personal shrine: a shimmering structure constructed from sacred blankets, ostrich feathers, Buddha figurines, and photographs of the Buddhist lamas who’ve guided him.

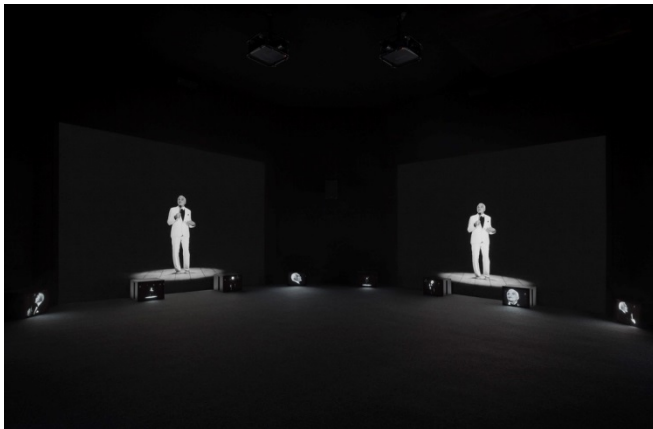
Matthew Higgs, the director of White Columns, was drawn to the collaborative, activist bent of Giorno’s work from a young age. “There was an extraordinary philanthropy about John’s practice, where he would encourage and support other artists, other poets, and other musicians under the rubric of his larger enterprise, GPS,” he explains. “As I got to know the work more, I realized that this persistent sense of philanthropy behind his work—and the way that he brings other people and other voices into his orbit—is one of the most extraordinary and compelling things about his practice.”

For all his accomplishments, Giorno is ardently humble and routinely credits the lasting influence of his work, and the joys of his life, to chance and luck. “I was aware of the energy of New York, in terms of poets and artists being here, from the very beginning,” he recalls. “And I had the good luck to somehow be in this place when these things were happening.”

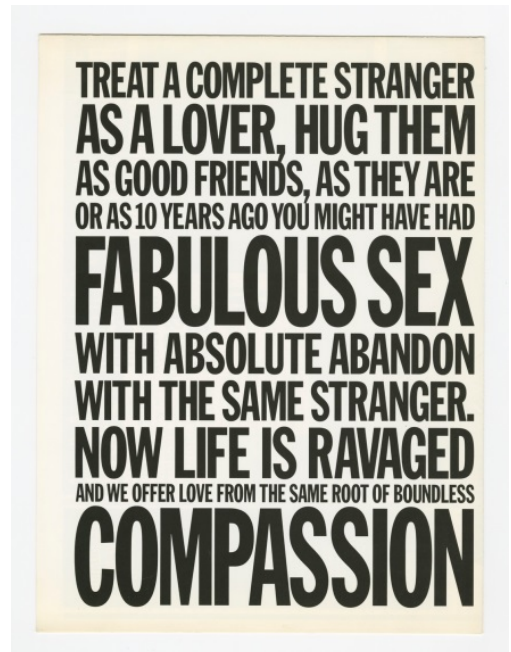
This nuanced, multi-part exhibition tells a different story, though: one of an artist’s tireless efforts to bring his community together, and to weave art into the fabric of everyday life.



Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs, John Giorno: *You're the Guy I Want to Share My Money With*, 1981 . © Giorno Poetry Systems, Courtesy of John Giorno Archive. Right: Installation view of “John Giorno and Tibetan Buddhism” at Hunter College’s 2015 Hudson Gallery, 2017. Photo by Daniel Pérez.



Left to Right: Installation View of *Thanx 4 Nothing*, 2011 by Ugo Rondinone at Sky Art, 2017. Photo by Daniel Pérez © Ugo Rondinone. Courtesy of Nadine Johnson; Installation View of *Andy Warhol, Sleep, 1963* and other works by Andy Warhol, at Swiss Institute, 2017 Photo by Daniel Pérez. © The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, 2017 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Left to Right: UGO RONDINONE: *I LOVE JOHN GIORNO* Keith Haring, William Burroughs and John Giorno, 1991. Courtesy of John Giorno Collection, Author Unknown; John Giorno, *AIDS Treatment Project*, 1993. © Giorno Poetry Systems, Courtesy of John Giorno Archive.