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## Giorno as Muse

By: Francine Prose



John Giorno at Hotel Chelsea, 1965.

Not long ago I saw a terrific film made by the abstract painter José Parlá, who has been commissioned to create a large mural for One World Trade Center and decided to create the documentary ONE: Union of the Senses about the process of making the painting and the city that inspired it. In an on-stage interview after the film, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to the accompaniment of a live jazz orchestra, Parlá said he envisioned it as a love letter to New York: its rhythms, its subway, its streetscapes, its thrillingly diverse population. I don't remember the word "muse" being used during the talk, but it certainly ran through my mind, and doubtless it occurred to others in the audience. The film was Parlá's buoyant and grateful thank you to the city that had inspired him.

In 2002 I published a book entitled *The Lives of the Muses*. To be honest, the relationship between the muse and the artist served for me more as a principle of selection than a subject of inquiry. I used an admittedly binary, limited, and limiting template (male artist, female muse) to choose and contrast certain narratives—from literary and art history—that I wanted to tell about the relationship between men and women. It wanted to keep things simple, to keep the parameters narrow.

But then, as now, I actually believe that a muse—if we are using the word not to mean one of the Greek goddesses but more loosely to signify the source and wellspring of inspiration—can be anyone, of any gender, any race, any age. It can be a lover or partner, an artist’s model (as it clearly was for so many painters of the past), a family, a child, a face we glimpse on the street. It can be a landscape, a town, a newspaper clipping, or (as it often was for Henry James) an anecdote we hear at a dinner party. It can even be another work of art: the urge to write something as good as Kafka’s “The Judgment.”

A muse can be whomever or whatever makes an artist want to go to the studio, the desk, the piano, the rehearsal stage—and work.

In *I ♥ John Giorno*, Ugo Rondinone pays tribute to the poet, visual and sound artist John Giorno as his muse. Giorno and Rondinone have been lovers for eighteen years. Curated by Rondinone, the show—which includes Giorno’s extensive archive and documents the range of his work—not only celebrates the career of an important artist but tells the sort of story we all want to hear: almost twenty years—and Rondinone still thinks of the guy as his muse! To acknowledge someone as your muse is the greatest expression of gratitude, of love, and respect. The exhibition includes Rondinone’s film, *Thanx 4 Nothing*, in which Giorno recites a poem by that name, yet we can assume that the show’s title might just as well have been *Thanx 4 Everything*.