

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Style

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Left: John Giorno Performing, 1979. Right: John Giorno Reading at Town Hall in New York City, 1976.

Mostly I knew things about John Giorno when I first saw him perform. That he was a Buddhist, and it sounded like he had been a junkie, and from his poem I thought I understood that it was still hard for him to not do junk. Turns out that was fictional. But I was convinced. He used to put poems on the phone like you could call and get one. Now he made records of poetry. He used to have a pirate radio station, he used to date Andy Warhol, he was asleep in his film.

We used to usually hear that same poem when he performed which was what famous poets did. You had no shame about reading that same poem. I would be very aware of his body when he performed. He wore a black T- shirt and looked a little criminal. I figured it was the drugs, and Buddhism, and he was fit. People who used to do drugs worked out. Plus he was gay. Obviously.

He bent a little. I was aware of this boxer curl I liked to think about when he read his poem. His voice started to change a little bit. Got more Southern though I thought of him probably coming from the Midwest. Eventually at one point he began to perform with headphones on, and this echo effect then would do some of the saying things twice that he did in his poem. It was kind of interesting how much he was always involved in media. Producing poems and radio, etc. and now part of his performance was technology. It was a performance artist thing.

Suddenly it was great. There was a glimmer. The accent had gotten so strong, the bend seemed part of the voice, like body was forcing the voice out, the headphones were gone and the whole thing, the man, the history, the face, the Buddhism became a sculpture and it was animated by this light and the man was smiling now, and he seemed really happy about what he had become. It seemed like he had almost become a little bit holy, now, that was his crime. He glimmered with the intelligence of what he had done, when he got up and did the poem in front of audiences everyone got it now. Not that they hadn't before but everyone seemed to be getting the total thing all at once, that this was devastating art, that what he was saying was absolutely true, no matter what he said, bending and swaying. It had always been a little bit long, now it could go on forever, it felt like everyone's poem when he read, and the paper had been gone for so long. I do remember seeing it, the piece of paper, like in the '80s or something but the poem was long gone, the man was the thing and he wasn't even a man, yeah he totally was but it was this collapse even into the audience. It was everyone's thing, a perfect art.