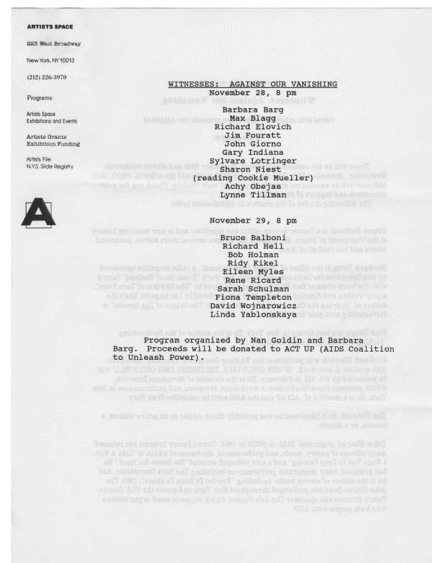


BROOKLYN RAIL

July 1, 2017

IX. Everyone Gets Lighter

By: Harry Burke



Witnesses: Against our vanishing, 1990.

John Giorno’s imprint on contemporary American poetry is profound. He published his first collection, *Poems*, in 1967 as a late contemporary of the Beat generation, and has been associated with moments as varied as the New York School, Pop Art, and slam. Often working on multiple projects at any one time, he has produced LPs, video clips, computer-designed poem prints, books, and “Electronic Sensory Poetry Environments.” His work fizzles across styles and scenes with an energy that touches on the tang one may experience on a sultry afternoon in Lower Manhattan. His voice is distinctive, and has evolved with the political complexities of the last half century. As the optimism of 1960s counterculture found a need to reformulate against the attacks of imperialist patriarchy—from the Vietnam war to the ongoing AIDS crisis—so has Giorno always spoken for a more peaceful and inclusive world. And yet, for his heterogeneity, and for his generosity in sharing the spotlight with peers and lovers alike, Giorno has remained difficult to hold to a single position. His joy eludes categorization. His legacy is his influence: his work finds its measure in the deep effect it has on those around him, with a selflessness that is provocative to this day.

Invited to organize a sequence of public programs for I ♥ John Giorno, Artists Space has chosen to trace this influence through a series of readings that position poets and writers who came of age with Giorno in New York’s East Village scene in the 1960s–1980s—Anne Waldman, Bob Holman, and Fanny Howe, among others—alongside figures in today’s intricate landscape of North American poetics who trace numerous other positions opened by Giorno’s work. The programs, peripatetic as the festival itself, will take place

http://brooklynrail.org/special/I_LOVE_JOHN_GIORNO/everyone-gets-lighter/IX-EVERYONE-GETS-LIGHTER

across Lower Manhattan, from institutionally accredited venues such as Artists Space and, in collaboration with I ♥ John Giorno co-host 80 WSE Gallery, the roof of the Kimmel Center at Washington Square Park, to independent spaces such as the Marble Cemetery by Second Avenue, the oldest public non-sectarian cemetery in New York City. The durations of readings will vary: shorter line-ups will encourage in-depth engagements with the language and voice of individual poets, while events with a larger array of contributors will recall the poetics of the speak-outs that were common in the famous bandstand of Tompkins Square Park, which was demolished by the city after the park's riots in 1988, or of the untamed, celebratory New Year's Day Marathon at the Poetry Project, in which Giorno has played the role of protagonist since its inception in 1974.

Wide-angled, the series will spotlight one striking aspect of Giorno's work: his weakening of the boundary between poetry and performance. Formulating his voice in a moment that saw performance emerge as a form of radical, dematerialized artistic practice in Manhattan in the 1960s, Giorno has railed against the idea that a text is first and foremost a written object, and has sought a liveliness and instantaneity in the presentation of his work. He has attempted to open his subjectivity into a public realm, approaching the fluidity and contestation of the queer body in public space with a nuanced ecstasy. His attitude remains catalyzing in its refusal of stasis and conformity— a position that will be honored, extended, and complicated by readers throughout the I ♥ John Giorno summer program.

In tribute to Giorno's inventive approach to distributing and publishing the written and spoken word— from his nonprofit record label Giorno Poetry Systems to his phone-based poetry service *Dial-A-Poem*—all readings in the series will be recorded, with videos made available online at ilovejohngiorno.nyc and artistspace.org. By bringing Giorno's investigations of mediation and immediacy into the newly intimate performative spaces of the internet and social media, the project will be open to publics beyond Manhattan, and will continue Giorno's radiant project of giving outward in order to welcome in.

Too much has remained constant in America since Giorno started writing and performing in the early 1960s—from war to homophobia, among other mechanisms of institutionalized oppression. Against this, poetry remains a vehicle for imagining other formulations for the subject and its integration into social worlds. Giorno's example, in this regard, burns. It is marked by a singular ability to turn a phrase into a moment, and to transcend this moment, in a fierce embrace of life.