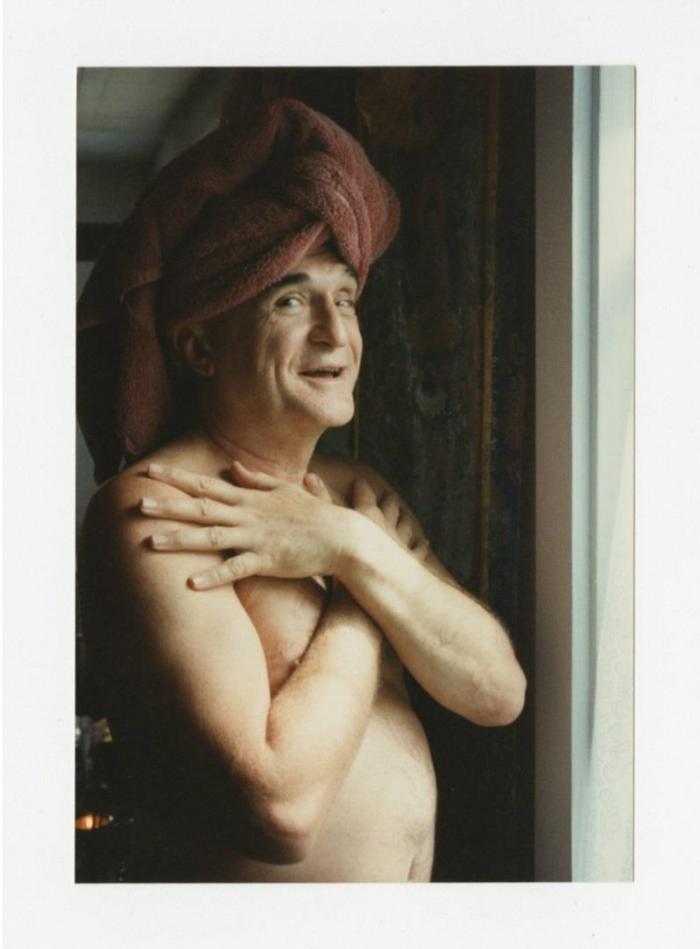


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John Giorno Takes New York

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He's been Andy Warhol's lover, Patti Smith's collaborator, William S. Burroughs' roomie and Ugo Rondinone's partner, but a new New York City-wide exhibition is proving that John Giorno is so much more than that. I ♥ John Giorno will be taking over 13 NYC locations from tomorrow, coinciding with the poet and artist's 80th birth year and the summer solstice.

The exhibition passed through Paris's Palais de Tokyo at the end of 2015 and was a sensation – the centrepiece being Rondinone's video installation of Giorno reading his comforting, sexy, sharp-tongued and thoroughly Buddhist poem *THANK 4 NOTHING* (it was also one of the standouts at the Hayward Gallery's hugely popular Infinite Mix show in London).

The rest of the exhibition includes Giorno's Dial-A-Poems, his statement/poem paintings, a recreation of his fireplace and Warhol's videos of him sleeping. It'll be taking place at venues including the Swiss Institute, White Columns, The Kitchen, Artists Space, New Museum, High Line Art, Red Bull Arts New York, the Rubin Museum of Art, and Hunter College. We went in with Giorno on the eve

of the opening to discuss the changing Bowery, smoking weed and understanding the empty nature of the mind.

How much of the exhibition is you, and how much is Ugo?

Ugo, as you know, is a great artist and a sculptor and I ♥ John Giorno is a work of art by Ugo. It's more than a curation, it's more than an installation. I'm 80 years old, so it's taking all the elements of my life and putting them in these venues.

How is the New York show going to be different from the Paris one?

The show in Palais de Tokyo was so great. It was the entire museum and nine chapters, because there were nine galleries. And we didn't think it would ever come to New York. There was limited space in Paris, so things like the AIDS Treatment Project was almost completely left out and there's one very important film

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that was made by Peter Ungerleider, who died in the 1990s. That becomes an installation. And I did this project with Abbie Hoffman, broadcasting on Radio Hanoi in the early '70s to the troops in South Vietnam.

You were in New York and part of the gay community when the AIDS crisis hit in the '80s. You must have known so many people dying. How did you cope with that?

It was such a new catastrophe, and I'm a Tibetan Buddhist, so when you deal with things like giving and generosity and being kind to somebody, it sort of generates a feeling of love, so then it's all about those moments. You never think they're going to die and you help them every second until they do. Once one's not afraid of it and figures out a positive activity, it then becomes joyous. Helping with compassion, it becomes something wonderful to do.

THANX 4 NOTHING has caused a sensation wherever it's been shown. How do you feel about that?

That's part of my amazing relationship with Ugo. I write this poem and I perform it and rehearse it. It didn't turn out so bad and then he does this thing and it becomes a great work of a great artist and I happen to be the subject. It's similar to this whole gigantic show.

You've been together for about 20 years. How did you meet?

He came by here, where I'm talking to you from on 222 Bowery in New York. He saw me perform on January 1st of 1998 at St Mark's Church and he had an idea about collaborating with a poet and he called me. Then two or three months later he came by to talk about the collaboration. And then, instead of collaborating, we became lovers instantly! Which is a little bit rare. So that happened and then after that, we've collaborated many times.

You've been living on the Bowery for ages. How have you seen the street and New York change over the years?

I've been living in this building for 55 or 56 years and the Bowery has changed so many times. It isn't as though there's one nostalgic period of the past that was heaven. It's been constant change, multi changes inside of each decade. It was always a derelict street, even in the 17th Century. If you wanted to fuck whores on the Bowery outside of what was New York City or Amsterdam, it was on the Bowery. So it was always the worst street. It was the last street they got around to exploiting.

It's in the process of changing. There's the New Museum facing me, and many galleries are coming. It's become very dense with tourists, so you hear German and Spanish and Italian or Russian any time right outside my door. But something else is just happening here right now. Right across the street is the YMCA Bowery Mission, and one of the gigantic buildings has been sold to Ace Hotels. And a little bit to the left, Ian Schrager, the hotel guy, is building a five-star hotel. Then down the street, the Swedish people have some kind of huge hotel with 500 rooms being built on the corner of Bowery and Delancey. We'll see what happens. But that could be a major change. It could become so densely popular.

You ran with Warhol, Rauschenberg, Burroughs and more. How was that?

Well, in lower Manhattan here, it was a very small scene. If you put everybody together – all the poets and all those famous artists in the 20th Century – you didn't have more than 125 people and everybody knew each other in the very early '60s. All the pop artists and the poets from the New York school – everybody came to each other's parties.

And when did you become Buddhist?

I went to India in 1970, but I was sort of a Buddhist. I went to Columbia College and studied philosophy and Buddhism and one thing and another. I understood meditation, but I didn't meditate. In the '60s, I did sort of Zazen, which is easy to figure out, but I didn't begin formal meditation practice until I went to India and met my teacher, Dudjom Rinpoche.

How long do you meditate for every day?

Depending on our lives, with Ugo, we meditate in the morning together for about half an hour. And when I'm alone – because sometimes I sleep downstairs or we're on tour – I can do like two hours, two and a half hours. That's when I get up early.

And what would you say are the main principles you live by through Buddhism?

It's understanding the empty nature of the mind. In Ugo's case, he's a non-Buddhist. Meditation is just realising the mind can rest. A thoughtless mind is very powerful. So you do meditation practice to rest in great equanimity, or to let the thoughts dissolve. And Ugo understands that. He's not a Buddhist in a sense, but his work is totally Buddhist. His sculpture, they're all about those words form and emptiness. He understands the empty nature of all phenomena. You don't have to be a Buddhist to understand that because it's a basic truth.

Lots of people out there are probably inherently Buddhist without even realising it.

Well, I think so. I had those early inklings and I just went with it, because it was a way of training the mind. Of course Buddhism is a religion and it's hierarchical and all that stuff, but it's basically just understanding the empty nature of your mind and training your mind through meditation. I was attracted to Tibetan Buddhism and the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and I took it seriously, so I've practised all these years at a great benefit to my mind.

You like to smoke weed in the morning before you write. Can you talk about how that helps your creative flow?

You know, marijuana is a very good drug for a writer. And my best time for writing is after I get up and have my tea and my and I enter the day. My energy is purest and most full then. And so that's when I smoke, in those two or three or four hours that I'm working on that. For me, marijuana is very much of a working drug. Late at night with Ugo, I'm less interested in smoking. I just sort of passively smoke or take a tiny bit, because I'm done smoking. And that's when Ugo likes to smoke, at night.

Yeah, it's a nice little morning ritual.

William Burroughs thought that marijuana is sort of a writer's drug for one reason or another. But it's not true to other art forms. For video, sculpture and painting, it's not a drug of preference. I don't know any video person who smokes while they're working or any sculptor. Their sight is best worked without grass, but they all like to smoke when they have finished working. But for writers, grass is good.

And what kind of grass do you like? Easy grass?

Any kind. Easy grass or strong grass, it's all good to me!

And why are you launching the New York event on the summer solstice?

I'm not sure why! It's Ugo's choice. With this whole big summer show, I just almost let it happen, but it's a great choice. With all of these moments, like the summer solstice, it's a powerful moment when there's change in astrological and physical energy.