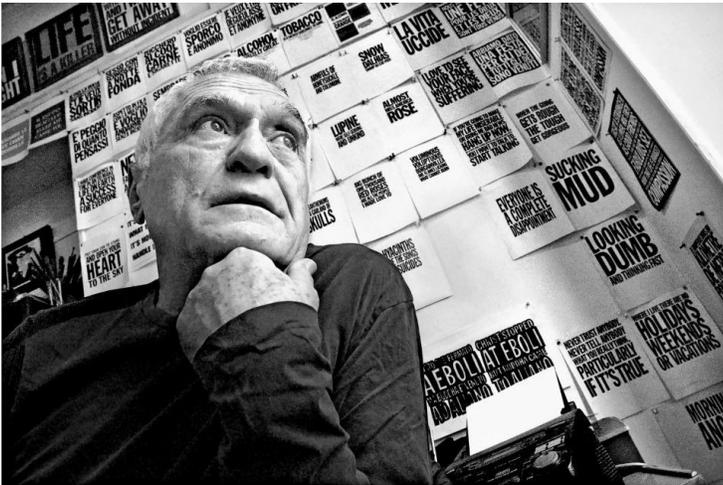


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## New York Is Celebrating John Giorno, One Of Last Great Underground Artists

By Mary Kay Schilling



John Giorno, surrounded by his own art works, in his studio in 2007. ROLLINE LAPORTE

“Anybody who lived through the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s and survived would have many stories to tell,” says John Giorno. Perhaps, but they’d be hard-pressed to match this poet and artist’s outsized life and influence, the inspiration behind the summer-long “Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno,” an exhibition that will spread across 13 New York City venues.

Like a Zelig with talent, Giorno has been a fixture of the city’s art scene since the late ’50s, pushing poetry out of its dusty corner and into the vanguard—presaging, among other things, slam poetry. “John is fundamentally a poet, but in the old school

sense of the word, like a bard, and he will use whatever tools he needs to sing, whether it’s the written word on the page, or a painting or performance,” says Laura Hoptman, an art historian and curator of painting and sculpture at New York’s MoMA. “He lives poetry. It’s his vocation, as opposed to what he does for a living.”

Hoptman is co-editing the official catalogue for “I ♥ John Giorno,” which is taking over the summer edition of *Brooklyn Rail* magazine. She sees Giorno as a reminder of a more freewheeling creativity, before the tyranny of social media inhibited originality and art became big business. “The notion of the fluid, collaborative artist who understands, is sensitive to and can work with many modes of expression, is very rare, and John Giorno is that.”

Hoptman became acquainted with Giorno in the late ’90s, around the time the poet met his husband, the Swiss-born mixed-media artist Ugo Rondinone, whose playful, interdisciplinarian work is collected by museums around the world. “John met his near mirror image when he found Ugo,” says Hoptman. “They are the most joyful, optimistic people I know.”

The couple sit across from me now, in their renovated Baptist church in Harlem, with a massive studio in the nave; they divide their time between here and Giorno’s Bowery home. The bearded Rondinone, nearly 30 years his partner’s junior, shows me the meticulously crafted maquettes he created for each of the “I ♥ John Giorno” venues. Giorno, in a T-shirt and jeans, looks on with interest, as if this had nothing to do with him. Still prolific, he tells me that he just finished a long poem that took two years to complete. He likes to experiment with form—“My poetry changes all the time,” he says—though his

“paintings” have remained consistently blunt. Giorno creates them in a small studio upstairs—droll, iconoclastic declarations, like “God Is Man Made,” or “Bad News Is Always True,” silk-screened on canvas. (“John’s this underground character, but he’s not a slacker,” Hoptman says.)

Giorno has a head like the face on a Roman coin—boxer’s nose, milky white hair in a Caesar cut. A wide smile radiates peacefulness, perhaps unsurprising for a practicing Buddhist who meditates, as he said in one of his poems, with “Olympian concentration,” for four hours a day. It’s a face Warhol made famous in 1963, in his spectacularly uneventful “anti-film” *Sleep*—5 hours and 20 minutes of the pop artist’s then-lover slumbering.

Giorno still gives off that artist-seducing magnetism. But it was his archive—which Rondinone first saw in 2000—that sparked the idea for the show. “For 50 years, I collected everything in boxes that I stored at my parents’ home in Roslyn Heights, Long Island,” says Giorno, who eventually had to find alternative storage after his parents passed away. As Rondinone went through the boxes, organized by year, he became consumed by an idea. “I wondered if I could turn a poet’s archive into a visual work,” he says. Two archivists were hired to go through over 12,000 documents, which Rondinone slowly turned into an exhibition ( *not* , he takes pains to clarify, a Giorno retrospective) that turns his husband’s life into a multimedia experience (video, paintings, sound recordings, every poem Giorno ever wrote) that comes remarkably close to capturing a creative life.

Giorno grew up in a well-to-do family, but he quickly dropped out of that world, falling in with Beats and pop artists while at Columbia University in the early ’50s. He befriended the poets Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, but they weren’t the ones galvanizing his own work. It was Warhol, Jasper Johns, Merce Cunningham, John Cage and another lover, Robert Rauschenberg, who turned Giorno on to technology and the idea of recording his poetry with sound distortion. “A poet is a bit old-fashioned, and pop artists felt everything was possible. If you had an idea, you just made it happen,” says Giorno, much of whose work is a fierce melange of avant-garde practices, psychedelics, Buddhist themes and the heightened emotionalism of hysterical poetry.

Giorno made another fortuitous connection, in 1964, with William S. Burroughs. The two lived in the same building, 222 Bowery, home of Burroughs’s infamous bunker (now part of the three lofts Giorno owns in the building). Burroughs and his great friend, the sound poet Brion Gysin, were popularizing cut-ups, a Dadaist technique in which text is cut up and rearranged to create new text. “This was highly influential for John,” says Hoptman. “The whole point of cut-ups was to make words and images have the same value.” Giorno is best known, poetry-wise, for this period, when he began gathering and combining language from, say, newspaper headlines or magazines—the literary equivalent of a collage, or one of Rauschenberg’s assemblages. (Keith Haring, while a student at the School of Visual Arts, would become close to Burroughs and Giorno; his diaries reveal that their work deeply affected his use of hieroglyphs.)

Giorno was, like most of his crowd then, a serious psychonaut. “I don’t think there was a drug that John didn’t try,” says Hoptman. His trips became more spiritual after he visited India in 1971, where he met H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, leader of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhists. (As one of Nyingma’s first Western students, Giorno has been instrumental in its spread in the U.S.) But while Giorno mastered detachment, his poetry remained as confrontational as ever, as evidenced by his 1972 collection *Cancer in My Left Ball*.

In Giorno’s world, spirituality, violence, sex and radical politics mingle: He has remained militantly gay and relentlessly anti-war (beginning with his work with Abbie Hoffman on Radio Hanoi in 1967). Revolution is his comfort zone. While Giorno has always published in books and magazines, he finds their audience limited. In the ’60s, he began to experiment with mass delivery systems, like printing his

tweet-like poems on T-shirts or canvases, eventually coming up with a bit of radical chic that went national in 1968: The enormously popular and critically acclaimed Dial-A-Poem was as easy as picking up the phone and dialing for the weather report (something people used to do). Over the years, Giorno recorded hundreds of artists and counterculture characters (Burroughs, Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Cage, Bobby Seale and Taylor Mead among them) reading three-minute bits of poetry, as well as rants, sermons, Black Panther speeches and Buddhist mantras.

Many of the Dial-A-Poems are on the albums Giorno produced through his nonprofit artist collective and record label Giorno Poetry Systems, founded in 1965. (He briefly referred to himself as Giorno Poetry Systems.) GPS released 18 albums, most of them compilations that included some of the earliest recordings by Philip Glass, Patti Smith and Laurie Anderson. There are also collaborations between Giorno and the musician Lenny Kaye (of Patti Smith Group fame), the avant-garde composer Glenn Branca and, of course, Burroughs; their 1975 spoken word album cover features the two standing in a pasture, the dandy-suited, gun-loving novelist cradling a rifle.

A punk before punks existed, Giorno's amplified, in-your-face, repetitive style—with its rolling, mantra-like cadence—is surprisingly moving, and his early live performances, sometimes in clubs in front of a band, were enormously influential to performance artists Karen Finley and Penny Arcade and the alternative rock band Sonic Youth. "I ♥ John Giorno" includes an opportunity to see Giorno in performance, doing "THANX 4 NOTHING," written on the occasion of his 70th birthday, in eight short films by Rondinone.

"I ♥ John Giorno" debuted at a single venue, Paris's Palais de Tokyo, in October 2015. Giorno, who was in the 1965 Paris Biennale and has performed in that city nearly every year since, is a star in France; the opening night was attended by 11,500 people, with lines around the museum. (He's huge in Italy, too, where he has his own museum, in the town where his family has lived for over six centuries: the Giorno Poetry Museum in Giorno.) "I think they get him in Europe in a way they don't here," says Hoptman. "The French...aren't turned off by art that is demanding."

It's ironic that in New York City, arguably his greatest muse, Giorno remains something of a secret beyond the art world. Rondinone's sweeping love letter is a big step toward changing that.

The exhibition opens on the first day of summer, June 21. Each of the participating spaces—an unprecedented collaboration by those institutions—will present a different chapter; *Sleep*, Dial-A-Poem, all 12,000-plus documents from his archive, and his gay rights activism (including the AIDS Treatment Project, a charity offshoot of GPS that Giorno established in 1984) are among them. A few chapters are devoted to the work of artists he's influenced, like the painter Elizabeth Peyton, the multimedia artist Pierre Huyghe and the musician Michael Stipe, who directed Giorno in R.E.M.'s last video in 2011. "One of the things that makes John special," says Rondinone, "is that, in addition to his being a link to so many different worlds—poetry, art, the spirit world and activism—he bridges generations. So many were influenced by him."

"But who wouldn't be?" says Hoptman. "He has had a beautiful, beautiful life."

*"I ♥ John Giorno" will be at the following institutions: New Museum, Sky Art, Swiss Institute, Red Bull Arts New York, High Line Art, Hunter College Art Galleries, Howl! Happening, The Kitchen, White Columns, 80WSE Gallery and Artists Space. Each space and live performance (including a Giorno reading at New York's Marble Cemetery on July 1) will be free to the public.*

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