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A Kaleidoscopic John Giorno Retrospective, Sprinkled Around New York

By Joshua Barone



John Giorno, left, and Ugo Rondinone at the exhibition “I ♥ John Giorno,” at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2015. Credit Alex Cretey-Systemans for The New York Times

Since the 1960s, John Giorno has been a nexus of New York’s downtown art scene. This 80-year-old poet, artist and activist has been a muse of Andy Warhol’s and has hosted dinner parties with friends like Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring. In more recent years he collaborated with the French artist Pierre Huyghe and starred in the music video for R.E.M.’s final single.

Also among Mr. Giorno’s admirers is his partner of nearly two decades, the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone, who this summer will stage “Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno,” an artwork in the form of an exhibition and festival that will open on June 21 at 13 locations around Manhattan.

Mr. Rondinone described “I ♥ John Giorno” — a title that suggests Mr. Giorno, who was born and raised in Brooklyn, as a quintessential New York figure — as a “kaleidoscopic” retrospective that includes items from Mr. Giorno’s archive, as well as works by his collaborators and Mr. Rondinone.

Among the works on view will be Warhol’s seminal 1963 film “Sleep,” in which the artist shot Mr. Giorno sleeping for more than five hours; Mr. Rondinone’s 2011 video work “Thanx 4 Nothing,” which features Mr. Giorno reading his poem of the same title; and a restaging of Mr. Giorno’s “Dial-a-Poem,” a 1969 piece that was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1970 exhibition “Information” and invites people to call a number and hear recorded poems by William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and John Cage, among others.



Stills of John Giorno in Andy Warhol's "Sleep" (1963). Credit The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, 2017 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mr. Giorno, in an interview at his airy loft on the Bowery, was more humble than Mr. Rondinone while speaking about the sweep of this exhibition, which includes five decades worth of art. "Every person can look back on their life and see a great opera," he said.

Still, his home — which actually comprises three lofts on different levels of a landmark 1885 building near the New Museum — has in many ways been as central to the New York art scene as Mr. Giorno's career. This is where Rothko painted, Burroughs lived and where Warhol shot "Sleep." Artwork on the walls include a photograph by Nan Goldin and a painting by Haring.

The bed where "Sleep" was filmed is still there — in 1998 Mr. Huyghe filmed Mr. Giorno on it in "Sleep Talking," which will be on view in "I ♥ John Giorno" — as are many of Burroughs's belongings, such as the typewriter with which he wrote the 1981 novel "Cities of the Red Night."

Portions of Mr. Giorno's home, like his Tibetan Buddhist shrine and a bronze-cast reproduction of his massive fireplace by Mr. Rondinone, will also be on view in "I ♥ John Giorno," which was first staged in 2015 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

The participating institutions in New York include Artists Space, High Line Art, Howl! Happening, Hunter College Art Galleries, the Kitchen, New Museum, Red Bull Arts New York, Rubin Museum of Art, Sky Art, Swiss Institute, White Columns and 80WSE Gallery. (There are only 12 venues on this list, but two of the 13 exhibition spaces are at Hunter.)

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