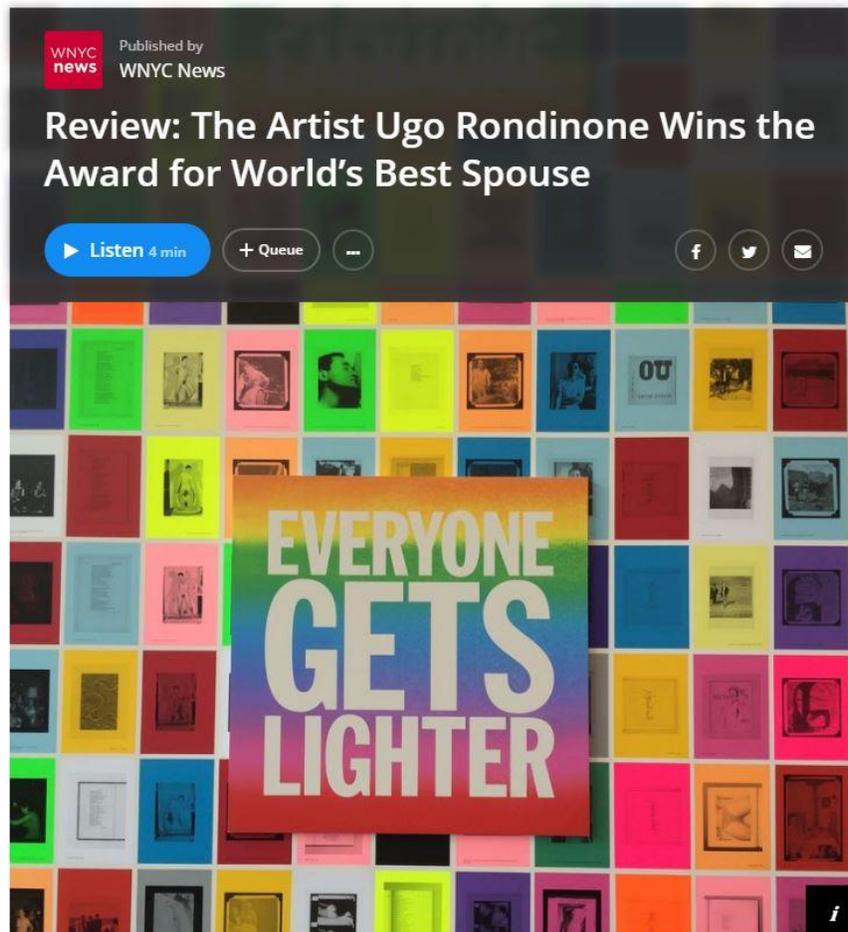




June 23, 2017

## Review: The Artist Ugo Rondinone Wins the Award for World's Best Spouse

By: Deborah Soloman



Great artists have never been known to excel as spouses, perhaps because they save the best part of themselves for their work. But Ugo Rondinone, an acclaimed Swiss-born sculptor based in New York, has just done something unprecedented in the department of spousal relations. He has organized a Manhattan-wide constellation of exhibitions in honor of John Giorno, his 80-year-old poet-husband.

“I ♥ John Giorno,” as the project is titled, is nimbly spread among 13 non-profit spaces including The Kitchen, Red Bull Arts New York, and The New Museum. All in all, the shows add up to an idiosyncratic Giorno retrospective that is amusing, beautifully designed and intermittently fascinating.

Who is John Giorno? You could call him an exemplar of downtown New York, a champion of a now-vanished culture that put a premium on experimentation. Giorno has won high distinction as a poet, a performance artist and a gay-rights activist. He is also a late-life painter, turning out rainbow-hued canvases inscribed with feel-good messages, like “Everyone Gets Lighter.” He first became famous in 1963 – by conking out. That year, he starred in Warhol’s film “Sleep,” a five-hour-long flick that captures its era’s utopian belief that art could be made out of the most humble materials, ZZZZ’s included.

“I (Heart) John Giorno” might be viewed as a pendant or at least a complement to the all-important Robert Rauschenberg retrospective now at the Museum of Modern Art. Both Giorno and Rauschenberg, who were friends and lovers in the mid- ‘60s, were preternaturally sociable beings with a talent for collaboration and cross-disciplinary hijinks. Giorno did for the poetry world what Rauschenberg did for the art world, shifting it away from the isolation of the studio and into the public realm of performance.

Giorno’s best-known creation is probably his “Dial-A Poem,” a short-lived venture he started in 1969, to allow callers to partake of the pleasures of a poetry reading in the comfort of their own digs. Happily, Dial-A-Poem has been reinstated for the summer. You can reach it at 641-793-8122. I tried it this morning and lucked out, suddenly recognizing the thin, creaky voice of John Cage, the experimental composer, at the other end. It felt as if he had returned from the dead to recite a poem which included the line, “It’s a question of one person having confidence in another.” Lovely, compassionate words.

The 13 exhibitions, by the way, each have their own flavor, and all are free to the public. You can pick up a map at any location. There is no beginning and no end, although I recommend that you wind up at White Columns. There, you can relax in an Angela Bulloch “Happy Sack” – i.e., a bean bag chair –that comes with headphones and an iPad, and listen to recordings that Giorno produced in the ‘60s under his own label. If the music and poetry don’t win you over, the spirit of generosity will.

