

Art Ba Ba The Shining Poet and Muse from the Golden Age of New York's Underground Art: John Giorno

Article by Sheng Luoying
September 19, 2023



John Giorno performance, Québec City, Canada, June 15, 1991 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced by permission - Photo: Françoise Janicot

“LIVING IN YOUR EYES” “THANX 4 NOTHING” “THE WORLD JUST MAKES ME LAUGH” “..... The exhibition space of Almine Rech Shanghai has assumed a brand new appearance as eye-catching letters in black and white or rainbow colors dominate the wall. After reading the text word by word, it is hard not to be intrigued by the artist who paints such bold phrases on canvas. Born in 1936, the late artist John Giorno shared a close kinship with Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. Currently on view at Almine Rech Shanghai, John Giorno’s solo exhibition I am a Poet is also the artist’s first solo exhibition in Asia.

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Installation view of John Giorno's exhibition *I am a Poet*, Almine Rech Shanghai, August 25 - October 14, 2023 /
© Courtesy of John Giorno Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

As the title of the exhibition suggests, John Giorno's first and foremost identity is a poet. In the midst of the star-studded New York literary and art world, Giorno has conducted innovative experiments and explored poetry through different mediums under the influence of visual art, performance, and music. His signature work *Dial-A-Poem* (1968-2019) is also on view at this exhibition. As the viewer picks up the phone and dial any button, they will hear a poem randomly played through the phone, recalling the playful style of mystery toy boxes. Moreover, as curator and Buddhist researcher Neil Zhang writes in the exhibition press release, another crucial part of John Giorno's identity is his role as a Buddhist amidst the spread of Buddhism in North America. Employing the mediums of the telephone, painting, performance, and consumer goods, Giorno aims to redeem poetry from the borders of banality and obsolescence, making the beauty of poetry as accessible to all just as the concept of 'Dāna' at the heart of Buddhism. When staring at, and then muttering the phrases on Giorno's canvas, we encounter a form of magic that is almost meditative.

On the opening day of the exhibition *I am a Poet*, Almine Rech invited Anthony Huberman, Executive Director of the John Giorno Foundation, Yuan Fuca, writer and curator, and Thibault Geffrin, Director of Almine Rech, to discuss John Giorno's artistic background, sources of inspiration, extraordinary contributions in community engagement, and more. We have organized the conversation as follows, thus opening up a dialogue on the concepts of "burning" and "shining" in John Giorno's life.

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Thibault Geffrin: To begin our conversation today, I would like to start with an anecdote. In 1963, John Giorno celebrated his birthday in New York, it was surrounded by the most impressive artist of the time, including Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Jones, Merce Cunningham, Edward Ruscha, Roy Lichtenstein, John Cage, among many others. Giorno was a key figure of the New York underground. He was a muse and a lover to other artists. Today, only a few people know about his extraordinary life. My question is how this kid from Brooklyn became the figure of the New York underground from the 60s and 70s, and how did the meeting with one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, Andy Warhol, play a major role in his career?

Anthony Huberman: He certainly had an incredible life and was surrounded by an amazing community. His relationship with the community that you named made a considerable impact on John Giorno. The New York art community back then was much smaller. Many artists, poets, musicians, filmmakers, dancers, all hung out at the same bars and restaurants, always bumping into each other, talking to each other, and spending time with each other. There was a huge amount of cross fertilization during that period in New York. And so inevitably, communities form as conversations begin across disciplines. Therefore, although John Giorno was a poet or identified himself as a poet, he shared close relationships with artists and musicians and choreographers.

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Film still of John Giorno in Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, New York. 1963 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation -
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John Giorno met Andy Warhol in the early 1960s on the occasion of Warhol's first ever exhibition in New York, and then become a lover to him. John found himself going to all these events and parties and meeting everyone, because Warhol certainly was circulating in a lot of different social contexts. John's relationship with Andy Warhol was impactful for a bunch of different reasons. In the mid 1960s, Warhol famously said in public that he didn't want to make paintings anymore and he wanted to make films. Warhol's first ever film was called *Sleep*, which just consisted of a man sleeping for 5 hours. And that man was John Giorno. And in this strange way, John became this notorious figure as being Andy Warhol's muse, Andy Warhol's star, and Andy Warhol's protagonist.

After his relationship with Warhol ended, John started to become very close to the artist Robert Rauschenberg, and they also became lovers. Robert Rauschenberg at the time started experimenting with a group called Experiments in Art and Technology, which was a kind of collective that put artists together with engineers and scientists. So that there was a certain expertise that engineers could bring to the conversation as artists weren't trained to know how to use machines or early computer technology. John was able to observe how these painters create interactive art installation, pushing the visual art world beyond its own boundaries and traditions. Hence, he asked himself, what about poets? I'm seeing all these painters go outside of the canvas as their medium and do performances and video works, so why can't poetry also experiment with going beyond its traditional context of the book or the magazine? So for John Giorno, that was a very important early experience and inspiration that led him to his own practice of taking poetry off of the printed page and into performance and into technology like the telephone.

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John Giorno and Robert Rauschenberg kissing, New York, United States, 1973 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced by permission

Thibault Geffrin: The title of the exhibition is *I am a Poet*. And back then, as you said, poetry was kind of out of date. Giorno expects poetry, like other mediums such as painting or music, to become cooler and more innovative through the use of new technologies or methods. This also leads directly to his most iconic work, *Dial-A-Poem*. Could you please expand on Giorno's love for and relationship with poetry, and explain what the work *Dial-A-Poem* is? And what impact has it had on the art world?

Anthony Huberman: *Dial-a-Poem* began, again, coming from this reflection of trying to situate poetry elsewhere off of the printed page, and also to try to democratize poetry, making it a part of everyday life instead of not just existing in poetry readings or coffee houses. The telephone, which is not only a piece of technology, but is also an object that people use every day. Perhaps the voice on the other line of a phone call does not necessarily have to just be the voice of your friend inviting you to dinner or the voice of someone telling you something, it could also be the voice of a poet reading you a poem.

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In 1968, John Giorno had an opportunity to open an exhibition at the Architectural League of New York. He bought a series of phones and industrial sized answering machines, then worked with engineers to help him build a system and set up a local phone number in New York that anyone could call. He then reached out to poets, artists and musicians in this community recite poems on record. Therefore, when you called, you would hear a random recording from a random poet. In the very first version, there were 22 poets that he invited to record. The success of this exhibition led to an invitation to be part of art historically important exhibition named Informa-tion at the Museum of Modern Art (New York). The curator invited John to present a new version of *Dial-a-Poem* at MoMA. With the huge popularity of MoMA, thousands and thousands of calls were pouring in every day.



John Giorno with *Dial-A-Poem*, 1970 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced by permission

And then over the years, John Giorno just kept adding inviting more of his peers to contribute and so that the amount of poems on the phone kept going up. In our exhibition in Shanghai, the piece that we have here is the very last version that he made before he passed away in 2019. This one is the most comprehensive, with almost 200 poets on there. So I encourage everyone to pick up the phone and dial a number. You'll see who you get, maybe you get Patti Smith, Allen Ginsberg, or William Burroughs, who knows?

ALMINE RECH

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John Giorno with *Dial-A-Poem*, New York, 1970 /
© 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced
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People using *Dial-A-Poem* at MoMA's "Information" exhibition, New York, 1970 / © 2023 John Giorno
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John Giorno, *DIAL-A-POEM* (Push-Button Edition), 1968 - 2019 - Telephone, computer with digitally recorded poems- 12.7 x 27.94 x 27.3 cm, 5 x 11 x 10 3/4 in - Edition 7 of 20 / © Courtesy of John Giorno Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

Thibault Geffrin: This solo exhibition at Almine Rech Shanghai is Giorno's first exhibition in Asia. How do you think local audiences will react to his work? How do you connect Giorno's work with poetry and even calligraphy? Text plays a key role in John Giorno's practice, even in paintings.

Yuan Fuca: I was thinking about this yesterday. The artist from '85 Art Movement in China called Wu Shanzhuan came to my mind. In a way, He has a similar style as John Giorno. I think one of his first installation utilized the poster style imagery from the period of Cultural Revolution in China. He isolated the highly ideological text from its original context, creating a series of works in the form of poetry. In 1985, Rauschenberg held an exhibition in Beijing, which greatly influenced Wu Shanzhuan and the generation of Chinese avant-garde artists in the late 1980s. UCCA's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art also held a Rauschenberg retrospective in Beijing a few years ago, and many connections can be drawn there. But as far as poetry is concerned, I think Chinese poetry is rooted in the a long history of literati traditions. There is also always an impulse to explore politics through poetry, or to express dissatisfaction with reality. "Misty poetry" was influential in the 1980s after the Cultural Revolution, and this group of poets also tried to blur the line between language and image, such as how to transform poetic imagery into visual form.

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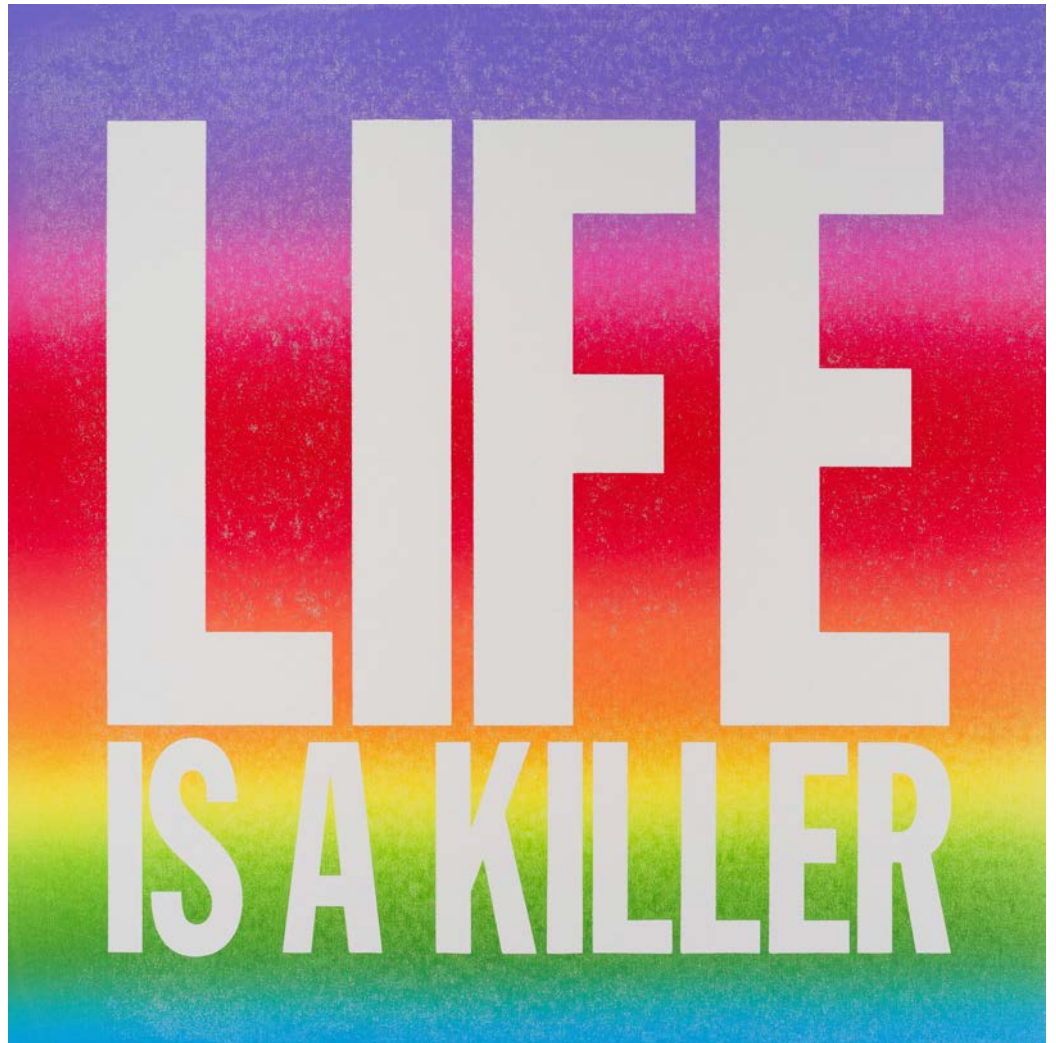


John Giorno, *EVERYONE IS A COMPLETE DISAPPOINTMENT*, 2018 - Acrylic on canvas - 101.6 x 101.6 cm, 40 x 40 in / © Courtesy of John Giorno Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

Anthony Huberman: John took poetry not only onto the telephone, but I think most predominantly the main space that he was interested in occupying was performance as a form and as a language. And what happens when a word goes from being written and read to being heard? And how can the voice play a role in this? Hence, John Giorno was focused on how to perform a word rather than how to just write or read a word. And he would not only do a traditional poetry reading, but also develop a specific way of pronunciation. People can recognize the kind of way in which you would say some words very loud and play with repetition. Later on, he toured the country playing not just in poetry reading context, but in rock clubs. And he would have a band with him. Again, the venue of the rock club as a way to deliver his poetry. Because he recognized that it was inherently more fun.

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John Giorno, *LIFE IS A KILLER*, 2017 - Acrylic on canvas - 101.6 x 101.6 cm, 40 x 40 in / © Courtesy of John Giorno Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

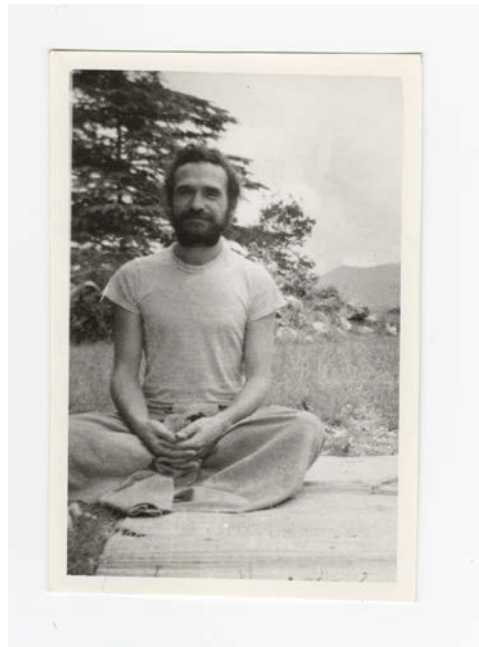
Thibault Geffrin: The exhibition press release written by Neil Zhang describes the relationship between Giorno's artistic practice, poetry, and Buddhism. There is a Buddhist concept called "Dāna," which can be translated as 'the art of giving.' Giorno has always been committed to giving back to the community. Could you elaborate more on the role of Buddhism in his practice? What is the impact on his work and life?

Anthony Huberman: Giorno was an incredibly committed practitioner who was very close with his teachers. He first went to India to meet with and study with Buddhist teachers in 1971. So pretty early on in terms of that the United States or maybe New York, in particular, has a long history of the art community learning from Buddhism and Buddhist teachers. But this was definitely on the early side of that happening. He put a lot of thought and energy into not only learning himself, but in helping those teachers come to the United States, and so that they could come and provide those

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teachings to his community or anyone in New York, and he helped them set up a place in Manhattan where they could do Buddhism teachings. The influence of Buddhism comes across in a couple of different ways in his artwork. First, the concept of repetition is something linked to a mantra or meditation practice at the heart of Buddhism. Second, Giorno's use of language itself expresses a concept of equality, showing the abandonment of "judgment". In his performance, he says "I wish that my life was only about shining and never burning." And this kind of phrase neutralizes that argument of burning as bad and shining as good. And it kind of acknowledges that both are part of what it means to be human. It's not about holding on to hopes of having one and avoiding having the other. It's more about embracing the fact that we all are connected to both of those forces are part of everyone's life. So I feel like that also emerges out of Buddhism.



John Giorno in India, 1971 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation -Reproduced by permission

Yuan Fuca: As a student at Columbia University (around the mid-1950s), Giorno studied comparative literature and was exposed to philosophical ideas in Buddhism. At the same time, Tibet also had a great influence on him. In his memoirs, he expressed a desire to travel to Tibet and had a romantic vision of the land. The rise of Buddhism and Tantra was a new phenomenon in the West at the time, which may have had something to do with his openly related expressions of homosexuality.

Anthony Huberman: He rejected that those two things somehow could be separated. I think that's a really important part. Still today, it's still ongoing. He, as you mentioned, he lived in the same building from 1966, all the way until he died. He lived in a building on the Bowery, 222 Bowery, which was an incredible building with

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an incredible history of other artists also living in that building, such French painter Fernand Léger, Mark Rothko and Lynda Benglis. William Burroughs, who John was very close to, lived there too. And when William Burroughs passed away in the late 1990s, John was able to acquire Burroughs's loft, and gave the keys to at a particular monastery up north in upstate New York. He went there regularly and was very close to the people there. He lamented that many people have missed the opportunity to learn about Buddhism because of the distance, and more people would benefit if the teachers came to New York. To this day, on the second Saturday of every month, the Buddhist teachers still come down to this attic to help those in need.



Bernard Heidsieck, William Burroughs, and John Giorno New York, United States, May, 198 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced by permission - Photo: Udo Breger

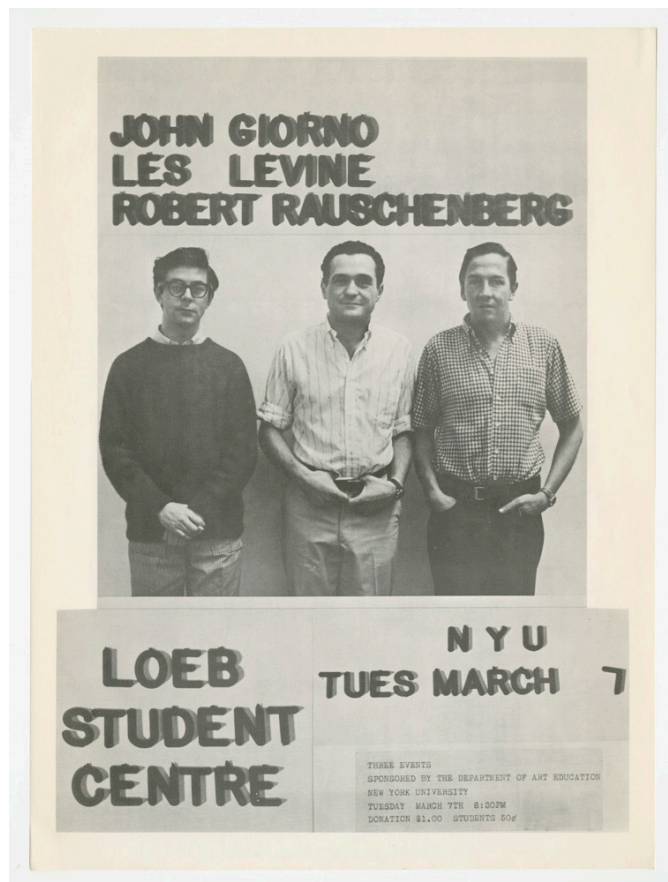
Thibault Geffrin: Finally, taking the foundation's founding purpose as a global starting point, how to view the evolution of poetry from the era of Giorno to today? Giorno wants to revolutionize poetry, to make it easier and more "cool." Do you think poetry has become "cool" today?

Yuan Fuca: I think using artificial intelligence to write poetry has great potential in the future. But what attracted me to Giorno's work was his attempt to share and give back. The focus can be less on poetry itself, and more on how to build a space of continuous sharing and communication that will become a new kind of legacy.

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Anthony Huberman: John represents this glue that then can connect artists, poets, and musicians to each other that they can talk to each other, learn from each other, work with each other. John created back in 1965, a nonprofit organization, called 'Giorno Poetry Systems', the GPS, which had a mission evolved over the years. It ultimately evolved into a mechanism that he had to use to support others, to support his peers, to support the work of artists, poets, and musicians. And he did that in many ways. He supported poets of course by inviting them to contribute to the *Dial-A-Poem* project, for example, to make sure that their voice and their work was made visible on this new platform. 'GPS' also started a record label in the 1980s, and as a way to support musicians. He started a grant program to help artists and poets with health issues as artists didn't have health insurance at the time. We're going to restart the record label and the grant program. We're also working on doing expanding international versions of *Dial-A-Poem*, so audiences can find *Dial-A-Poem Korea*, *Dial-A-Poem Germany*, *Dial-A-Poem Norway*, *Dial-A-Poem India*... Therefore, while supporting a new generation of poets and their works, we are also reflecting on the centralization of English in the field of poetry, in the hope that poetry can be disseminated and appreciated in more multilingual and cultural contexts.



Three Events by John Giorno, Les Levine, Robert Rauschenberg, March 7, 1967 / © 2023 John Giorno Foundation - Reproduced by permission

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Audience: I noticed that John Giorno's paintings could be divided into two kinds in terms of colors, one is black and white, and the other is chromatic. Is his use of color related to his personal experience?

Anthony Huberman: In the 1980s, Giorno's initial artistic practice was not canvas, but with what is called a vinyl paint, which has a lot of texture to it, a lot of colors and always in square. Later on, he started doing these positive negatives, with white letters on black background or black letters on white background. Around 2000s, he began to create large paintings in chromatic backgrounds, a shift that must inevitably linked to his personal identity as a homosexual. At the same time, color also makes the visual effect of the text more prominent, makes it louder. Giorno has always been interested in how sound affects text, how color affects text, and how the size of a painting affects text. Towards the end of his life, Giorno found these very large boulders and carved phrases on them, interested in the relationship between the enormous weight and gravity of the rocks and the lightness of language. At the end of his life, he still tried to explore the inseparable relationship between the two.



John Giorno, *SPACE MIRRORS MIND*, Frieze London, September 14 - November 13, 2022 / © Courtesy of John Giorno Foundation and Almine Rech