

Echoes of John Giorno with Ugo Rondinone in Venice

By [Stephanie Bailey](#)
Venice, 27 April 2022



Ugo Rondinone, *the sun II* (2018). Gilded bronze. 508 x 515.5 x 71 cm. Exhibition view: *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Founded in 1261 and at its current location since 1301, it's hard to believe that the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista has never hosted a solo

exhibition during the Venice Biennale until now.

Supported by an impressive roster of six galleries—Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Esther Schipper, Sadie Coles HQ, Gladstone Gallery, kamel mennour, and Kukje Gallery Ugo Rondinone's *burn shine fly* (20 April–17 September 2022) begins in the courtyard in front of a chapel dedicated to St. John the Evangelist, who some believe was the only one of Jesus' 12 apostles to die a natural death.



Ugo Rondinone, *the sun II* (2018). Gilded bronze. 508 x 515.5 x 71 cm. Exhibition view: *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Cast in bronze and then gilded in gold, the gleaming sculpture *the sun II* (2018) is the solid imprint of tree branches that have been arranged in a circle to form what looks like, in this context, a monumental version of Christ's thorny crown.

The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista is the second oldest of Venice's Scuola Grandi, a handful of institutions set up by brotherhoods that could accept all bar nobles, whose focus evolved towards charitable works, culture, and

communities. Over centuries of use and expansion, the complex has evolved into an architectural palimpsest.



Ugo Rondinone, *the sun II* (2018). Gilded bronze. 508 x 515.5 x 71 cm. Exhibition view: *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Outside, the church's and Scuola's mediaeval façade thread with Pietro Lombardo's ornate 15th-century marble screen executed in the Venetian Renaissance, which acts like a gateway to the courtyard connecting both buildings, and now the dramatic frame through which *the sun II* may be first seen.

The church itself was founded in 960 by the noble Badoer family, who granted the Scuola use of the chapel for a maintenance fee, after they agreed to rent rooms from their property to the confraternity in 1301. The space around the altar, the chancel, was constructed in 1441, with works continuing through to the 18th century, when Bernardino Maccaruzzi completed the choir of San Rocco.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Just like the encounter between Rondinone's sun and Lombardo's screen, a high yet unobtrusive drama plays out in the juxtaposition of this chapel's historic yet weathered treasures with Rondinone's bold, contemporary interventions, which is to be expected in a place like Venice.

One of the oldest paintings on the walls is the 1626 depiction of the crucifixion by Domenico Tintoretto, the son of the famous Venetian—and apparent painting machine—Jacopo Tintoretto.

Hanging from the ceiling of the nave, amid the decorated but rundown interior of this still-consecrated space, are life-sized casts of dancers frozen in performative flash-frames, as if captured in free fall, float, or mid flip.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Each figure is painted an arresting sky blue with clouds flashing luminously across their bodies. As curator Javier Molins explains, the idea was to take the skies so often relegated to the background in religious paintings and embody them. As if heaven was that bit closer.

With that in mind, the show's title—drawn from *You Got to Burn to Shine* (1994), a book of poems by the late American poet and artist John Giorno—holds special weight.



John Giorno, *A HURRICANE IN A DROP OF CUM* (2015). Enamel on linen. 101.6 x 101.6 cm. © John Giorno. Courtesy the John Giorno Foundation, New York.

Rondinone and Giorno, whom critic Oliver Basciano described as a linchpin of New York's downtown scene, shared a relationship for over two decades, with Rondinone staging the multi-part, multi-venue exhibition for Giorno's 80th birthday, *I ♥ John Giorno* (21 June–20 August 2017).

Following Giorno's death in 2019, Gladstone Gallery organised *thanx 4 nothing (A Tribute to John Giorno)* in New York (23 November 2019–18 January 2020), which presented a multi-channel video installation Rondinone first showed in 2016.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *thanx 4 nothing* (A Tribute to John Giorno), Gladstone Gallery, New York (23 November 2019–18 January 2020). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Thanx 4 nothing (2015) is a truly moving portrait of Giorno, whose paintings isolate pithy statements in all caps against sharp, monochromatic superimpositions, many consisting of white text against acid-toned gradated surfaces, like *EVERYTHING IS DELUSION INCLUDING WISDOM* (2015), or the more colourful but equally profound, *A HURRICANE IN A DROP OF CUM* (2015).

Then, there is the one that resonates in Venice: *LIVING IN YOUR EYES* (2015).



John Giorno, *EVERYTHING IS A DELUSION* (2015). Acrylic on canvas. 101.6 x 101.6 cm. © John Giorno. Courtesy the John Giorno Foundation, New York.

'Thanx 4 Nothing' (2006) is the name of the poem that Giorno wrote on his 70th birthday, whose sentiments freewheel through life's profundities, pains, and contradictions as sharply as they do across his painting.

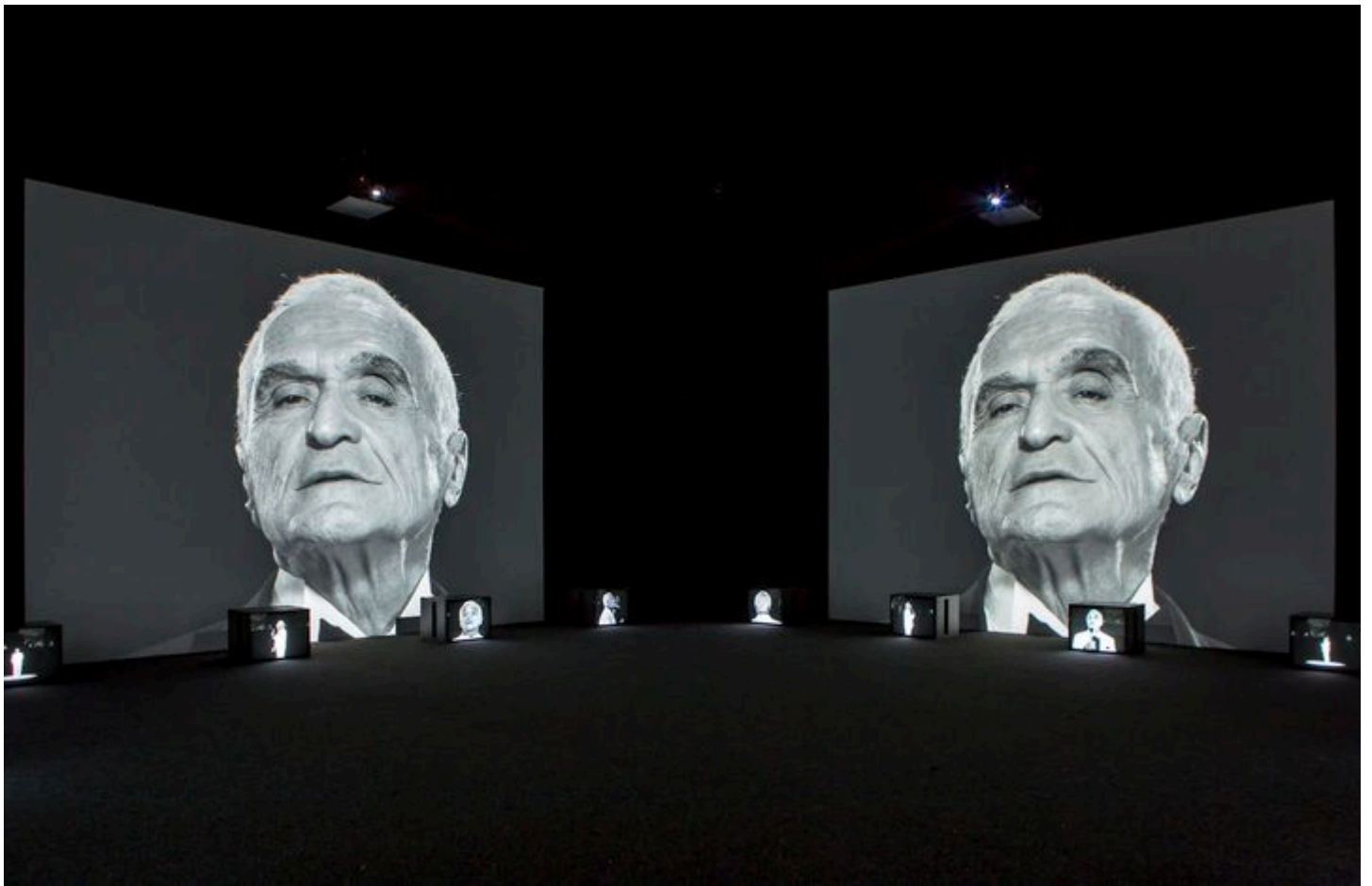
'Thanks for nothing on my 70th birthday / I want to give my thanks to everyone for everything,' Giorno begins. What follows is a cascade of rich reflections on a life lived—Giorno's 'token of appreciation'—like 'allowing the natural clarity of your mind to flow free'.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *thanx 4 nothing (A Tribute to John Giorno)*, Gladstone Gallery, New York (23 November 2019–18 January 2020). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Rondinone filmed Giorno performing his words in a black tuxedo under a spotlight on the darkened stage of the Palais des Glaces theatre, and a white suit illuminated by the white lights of a clean, white cube T.V. studio.

Presented in a dark room, save for floor lights trained up to each 'stage', Giorno appears from different angles and distances, larger than life—almost like a hologram, so luminous are the contrasts between black and white.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *thanx 4 nothing (A Tribute to John Giorno)*, Gladstone Gallery, New York (23 November 2019–18 January 2020). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

The poet speaks with a minimalist, post-lullaby melody; an aching, ascending pluck of an electric guitar, one of three strings at a time, and a cymbal's soft tap.

The sonic composition seems to thread through Giorno's breath as his words rise, fall, and pause; a spatial embrace recalling Rondinone's stunning use of a single looped cut from Swell's 'Too Many Days Without Thinking' (1997) to serenade a six-channel video installation from 1999 to 2000, among his best works, included in Rondinone's Bass Museum of Art show, *good evening beautiful blue* (29 October 2017–25 March 2018).



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *good evening beautiful blue*, Bass Museum, Miami (29 October 2017–25 March 2018). Courtesy Bass Museum.

thanx 4 nothing is as good, if not better. At points, images of Giorno snap between the two sites in which he was filmed, creating a strobing, disco elicitation of the days Giorno looks back on.

This audiovisual language recalls the everlasting memory of watching lights flash across filmmaker Robert Beavers standing in a field in Arcadia, Greece. He was looking at a giant screen firing light beams from the splices composing avantgarde filmmaking legend Gregory Markopoulos' still-unfolding magnum opus *Eniaios* at *The Temenos*, which Beavers has continued to produce and screen decades after his lover's death.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

With that in mind, while *burn shine fly* intends to express a contemporary version of the sublime, and encourage, per the artist's words, 'a deep reflection about the marvels and mysteries of life', its title also roots it to a deeply personal yet common experience of enduring love and inevitable loss.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

That sense continues through a door into the former Badoer family crypt, now named the Badoer Exhibition Space. Equal parts an abstraction of past and future memorials, an invocation of a séance, and a kind of hopscotch, brightly patinated bronze casts of melted candles in various molten states are positioned across the floor.

From crisp white to fluorescent yellow, purple, and pink, these are classic Rondinone tones, as they are Giorno's. They inject a sense of play into this still-solemn site, invoking the soft, smooth, yet staccato flow that defined Giorno's poetry, as with this pithy summation of the circle of life: burn, shine, fly.



Exhibition view: Ugo Rondinone, *burn shine fly*, Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice (20 April–17 September 2022). Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Gladstone, New York; Kamel Mennour, Paris; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

There is one moment in *thanx 4 nothing* when Giorno tells Rondinone what he hopes for after he's gone. 'In the golden age of promiscuity / may they come here and make love to you / if you want'. Through those words, the lover's gaze from behind the camera lingers in silent response, and a portrait of one artist by another becomes an open conversation. As it seems to be here with a saint called John. —[O]