

John Giorno's New Show in Paris Was Organized by His Life Partner

By Ted Loos

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Art history has plenty of examples of couples who have teamed up for the better. Artist pairs have frequently made work alongside each other or as a team. Countless nonartist spouses have promoted the canvases and sculptures of their partners in ways large and small.

But rare indeed is a museum-level show of an artist organized by his or her significant other. It's an engaging game of historical fiction to think of a Helen Frankenthaler show with her onetime husband Robert Motherwell as curator, not to mention a Picasso exhibition put together by a lover like Dora Maar or Françoise Gilot.

But just such a rarity is a current show, the title of which plainly states its lack of objectivity: "I Heart John Giorno," which opened at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris on Oct. 21 and will remain on view until Jan. 10.

The curator, the artist Ugo Rondinone, is the longtime boyfriend of the subject, the poet John Giorno, a revered figure of the Pop Art and Beat eras.

Depending on whom you ask, the exhibition is either a new twist on the muse-artist relationship — if the muse is also an artist — or a collaboration. And, to make matters more genre-bending, Mr. Rondinone said he considered the show itself an artwork.

Both partners in the 18-year relationship — the couple are based in New York when not traveling the world — are in different ways highly invested in the exhibition, a labor of love that makes most people's anniversary videos look undercooked by comparison.



“You Got to Burn to Shine,” a 2008 work on paper by John Giorno.
John Giorno/Almine Rech Gallery

“Ugo understands me so well, and my work is not abstract to him,” Mr. Giorno, 78, said. “He sees it all in a more profound way.”

Mr. Giorno gained fame as Andy Warhol’s muse in 1960s experimental films and later as the creator of Dial-a-Poem, which allowed people to make a call to hear recorded verse by various authors. He was an early and influential American practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and an anti-Vietnam War activist once called a “would-be Hanoi Hannah” by the vice president at the time, Spiro T. Agnew.

Mr. Rondinone, 50, is a Swiss-born multimedia maestro who may be best known in New York for the rainbow-colored sign “Hell, yes!” (2001), which was placed on the facade of the New Museum when it was completed in 2007. He has spent four years piecing together “I Heart John Giorno,” while showing his own work all over the world in various exhibitions.

Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art who knows the couple well and has worked with both men, said their partnership reminded her most of the composer John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham, inspiring each other while working in different media. But she said that in terms of the exhibition, direct parallels eluded her.

“As much as the show exhibits the remarkable dedication that Ugo has to John’s extraordinary career, John’s decision to give Ugo his lifetime of work — his oeuvre entire — to make an installation is an act of love that I believe has no precedent, at least in recent art history,” Ms. Hoptman wrote in an email. “It’s the stuff of myth. Or at least an O. Henry story.”

The full scope of Mr. Giorno’s story will be laid out at the Palais de Tokyo in a more comprehensive way than it has ever been previously, and a domestic air pervades the show, which spreads over eight rooms and an “afterword” space.



"Thanx 4 Nothing," a 2015 film installation by Ugo Rondinone. John Giorno/Ugo Rondinone

"The exhibition is laid out like an apartment," said Mr. Rondinone, who will feature a life-size bronze cast of Mr. Giorno's fireplace he made in 2007. It will be surrounded by portraits of Mr. Giorno by various artists, including Elizabeth Peyton.

The exhibition is decidedly nonchronological. "Traditional curation is a challenge with John," said Elizabeth Dee, the New York art dealer who represents Mr. Giorno. "The old model doesn't work as well for an artist who is still creating."

She added: "I think it could become a new model for retrospectives. I don't think we've ever seen anything like it."



The album cover for "Biting Off the Tongue of a Corpse" (1975), which features works by the Dial-a-Poem poets.

Giorno Poetry Systems

Films of Mr. Giorno performing his works, including “Thanx 4 Nothing” (2006), are featured, as are his poetry-based text paintings. One room is devoted to his vast archive. Mr. Rondinone has photocopied the archive pages on colored paper and plastered them all over the walls and floor.

Giorno Poetry Systems also gets a room in the show. Founded in 1965, the enterprise has to date produced 55 albums with 150 collaborators, who include musicians, poets and performers.

“John is a generational figure who touched on so many things, and that is what makes him interesting,” Mr. Rondinone said.

The exhibition also devotes space to Mr. Giorno’s earliest cult fame, as the subject of Warhol’s five-hour film, “Sleep” (1963), which shows the poet slumbering. Included are several films that were rediscovered a few years ago, including “John Washing Dishes,” also from 1963, in which a naked Mr. Giorno cleans up in the kitchen.

Life and art have always been intertwined for Mr. Giorno and Mr. Rondinone, who met because of their work: The younger artist contacted the older one to collaborate on a project in 1997. These days, Mr. Giorno lives and works in a former Y.M.C.A. building on the Bowery that he has occupied for half a century, and Mr. Rondinone lives in Harlem. They see each other every other day.

“The exhibition was not built from the outside,” Mr. Rondinone said of the intimacy at its source. “In a way, it’s about our relationship.”

He added, “It’s an unusual marriage, and a lucky one.”

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