

John Giorno's Half-Century on the Bowery



The artist and poet John Giorno lives and works in three loft spaces at 222 Bowery. The third floor houses his office space and the living area he shares with his partner of 18 years, Ugo Rondinone; their bed is situated in front of giant arched windows surrounded by plants. “They are like children,” he says. “People have to come and water them.” *Nicholas Calcott*

According to its owner, the artist John Giorno, 222 Bowery is “an Italian-inspired palazzo for the beggars.”

The address housed New York’s first Y.M.C.A. in the 1880s — in what was then one of the worst neighborhoods in Manhattan, frequented by prostitutes and alcoholics. Much has changed since the poet, performer and painter moved in 53 years ago and created a haven for artists: It’s where Mark Rothko painted the Seagram murals and one of the spots where Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns hung out. Giorno and Andy Warhol were lovers there, from 1962 to 1965; Giorno starred in several of Warhol’s movies, including “Sleep.” William S. Burroughs lived there, too — he moved into the building in 1966, and to “the bunker,” now Giorno’s kitchen and meditation room, in 1975. “I never intended to live my life in this building, but somehow that happened,” Giorno says.

Giorno, now 78, owns three lofts in the building, including a living area and office space on the third floor that is bathed in light thanks to its Tiffany glass panels and arched windows. Giorno's partner, the artist Ugo Rondinone, created the giant, rainbow-colored "Hell, Yes!" light sign that graced the New Museum's facade from 2007 to 2010; when it was up, the couple had a direct view of it. "It was an unusual phenomenon. We'd just lie back in bed and look up at it," Giorno says.

Every New Year for the past 28 years, Giorno has removed all the furniture from the third-floor loft to make space for a Buddhist fire prayer ceremony, which sees 100 monks gather around the fireplace. (The artist is a Tibetan Buddhist in the Red Hat Nyingma tradition.) But most mornings, after several cups of Assam tea (and maybe a little marijuana), the area is where he writes poems, works on his memoir and meditates for about two hours. "I really love this space," he says. "It was built in 1884 by Cornelius Vanderbilt II's railroad architect in Queen Anne Romanesque Revival style. It is not square, but has rectangular, huge spaces, which are so nice to work in."

After, he'll head down to the second-floor studio, where he's been working on his latest series of silkscreen text-based canvases on rainbow backgrounds, a medium with which he first started experimenting in the 1960s. The messages, in giant type — "Big Ego," "Don't Wait For Anything," "Life is Killer" — remain sharply relevant. And down another flight of stairs, in "the bunker," the energy gets really electric. Burroughs's bedroom in the space remains virtually intact, his bed neatly made. There's the typewriter he used to write "Cities of the Red Night" and "The Place of Dead Roads," among other books; a bull's-eye target, still bearing bullet holes, remains on the wall surrounded by pieces from his infamous "Shotgun" series and a collaboration with Giorno, "Painters and Poets," where Giorno is the poet and Burroughs the painter.

Also downstairs is the living space where Giorno hosts dinner parties for artists and friends, at a table that seats 11 and has had the same orange chairs since, he says, "forever." He likes to prepare lobster and crab mousse, followed by a stuffed veal roast wrapped in bacon; and to drink, Champagne, of course.

Certainly, the Bowery landscape has transformed in Giorno's time. One day recently, the artist opened his door to find Rihanna there, shooting a music video in the building. "I didn't recognize her right away," Giorno says with a smile. "I love New York. I've been here 50 years. It has changed a thousand times, and so radically each time, but I have the good fortune that it stays the same for me."

Ugo Rondinone will curate a major retrospective of John Giorno's work, "I John Giorno," this fall at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, palaisdetokyo.com. "John Giorno: Space Forgets You" is on view April 2 through May 9 at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, 545 W. 20th St., New York, elizabethdee.com.