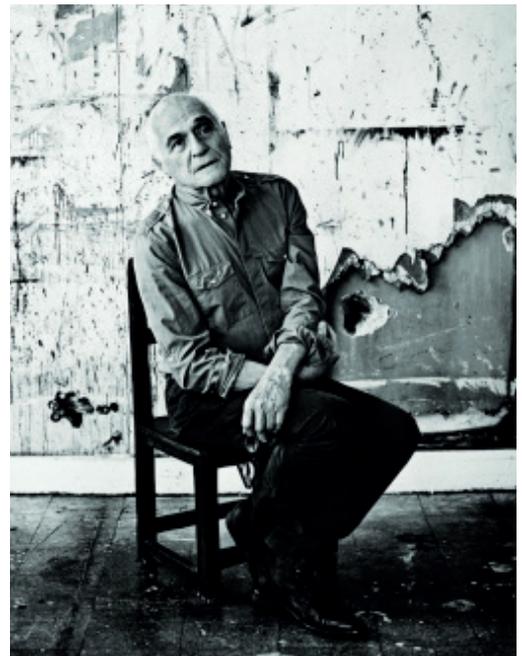


JOHN GIORNO

If there is a spiritual shrine in New York City devoted to the downtown art and literary worlds of the past half-century, it exists in a building below Houston Street on the Bowery, in the three lofts owned by poet, performer, painter, and legend John Giorno. Giorno has lived in the building for almost five decades and divides his life among its floors: one for writing; one for painting; and the third, "the bunker," which originally was home to his longtime friend William S. Burroughs, for, among other life-sustaining acts, dinners and occasional Buddhist prayer ceremonies when Giorno's teachers and friends travel from Asia. It is striking that, for a man who has lived for so long in one place, Giorno's prolific, polymorphous productions are so centered on movement. Whether it's his marathon poems full of insights and incidental reflections and mantra-like phrases that he regularly performs or his word paintings of fragmentary text (JUST SAY NO TO FAMILY VALUES, 2009; A HURRICANE IN A DROP OF CUM, 2009; LIFE IS A KILLER, 2009), his works refuse to stand still. They swirl and build and cultivate in their constant cultural rotation.

This is not surprising. At 76, Giorno hasn't only been a New York resident for most of his life, he has also been a key artist and social lightning rod. He moved to the city from his childhood home in Long Island to attend Columbia University in the 1950s and eventually headed downtown. He became embroiled with Andy Warhol during his early experiments with film—Giorno is the star of the iconic black-and-white 1963 movie *Sleep*, in which he appears as a handsome, nude young man sleeping from various vantage points for the film's entire five-hour run. Giorno was also friend (and sometimes lover) of artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and it was these creative experimenters of post-abstract and pop (unlike the New York School of poetry, with its absorption of abstract expressionism) that influenced Giorno's poetic trials—a «found» style pulled from the streets, enacting the language and politics of the time but also a very revolutionary interest in the means of delivery for poems, using new technologies to bring art to the listener. So began Giorno Poetry Systems, a nonprofit foundation committed to opening unexplored channels. Giorno began developing sound pieces in 1965, through his introduction to William Burroughs and artist and experimental writer Brion Gysin. Giorno famously wrote a poem called «Subway,» and it was Gysin who encouraged him to record sounds in the subway, creating a composition out of the environmental audio, and instigating Giorno's career in audio arts. In 1968, Giorno started his ongoing Dial-a-Poem series, where the public could dial a number and hear poems recorded by the likes of John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, and Jim Carroll (I personally like to think of it as a beautiful early version of the suicide-prevention hotline). Dial-a-Poem was exhibited in MoMA in 1970 and again last year.

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and, of course, Burroughs (the catalogs for the records are like zines, with cartoons, short stories, and photographs). In the '80s and '90s, much of the money earned by Giorno Poetry Systems went to Giorno's own community-minded AIDS Treatment Project. In 1998, Giorno met his partner, the Swiss multimedia artist Ugo Rondinone—who transitioned Giorno into another era of his career and into the folds of the current visual-art world. Rondinone is also a wordsmith, utilizing fragmentary texts in his series of rainbow light signs (one of which, Hell, Yes!, crowned New York's New Museum, nearby on the Bowery, for three years). Rondinone is currently working on a black-and-white film of Giorno performing his 2006 poem «Thanks for Nothing.» The film will be shown as part of a giant retrospective devoted to Giorno's art and life at Paris's Palais de Tokyo in 2015. In the meantime, Giorno is exhibiting a number of his text paintings—including a show at New York's Nicole Klagsbrun gallery in the fall.



Giorno may be one of the busiest, longest-running artists in New York, but in person, he is calm and kind, handsome and open, and it's no wonder so many artists and writers have been drawn to him over the years. One artist, Rob Pruitt, stopped by the building on the Bowery in February, and the two spoke over Assam tea in Giorno's painting room. On the wall was a painting that said this: «Eating the Sky.» -CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN



THE INTERESTING THING

THAT NOBODY KNOWS IS
THAT ANDY WARHOL HAD A
BEAUTIFUL BODY . . . THE
CLASSIC BODY, PERFECTLY
FORMED, TAUT MUSCLES.

—JOHN GIORNO



