

John Giorno

The Performative Word

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A magnetic poet and performer, John Giorno (New York, 1936 – New York, 2019) transformed the word into an art form.

The MAMbo – Museum of Modern Art of Bologna, part of the Bologna Civic Museums Sector of the Municipality of Bologna, dedicates to him *John Giorno: The Performative Word*, on view from 5 February to 3 May 2026. Curated by Lorenzo Balbi, the exhibition is the first major Italian retrospective devoted to the artist and is installed in the Sala delle Ciminiere. It celebrates one of the most radical and visionary figures of contemporary culture.

A key figure of the New York avant-garde, poet, artist, and activist, John Giorno broke down disciplinary boundaries, turning poetry into a living body—an action capable of inhabiting unexpected spaces. His friendships and collaborations with some of the most significant figures of the time, including Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, William Burroughs, John Cage, and Patti Smith, along with the founding in 1965 of Giorno Poetry Systems—the non-profit platform that revolutionized the dissemination of poetry by intertwining it with music, visual arts, political engagement, and community-based practices—testify to the indispensable impact Giorno had on the history of art.

“The retrospective dedicated to John Giorno fits perfectly within Bologna’s artistic context,” states Daniele Del Pozzo, Councillor for Culture of the Municipality of Bologna. “Giorno transformed the word into public art, extending performance practice beyond the page into unconventional contexts such as streets and telephone lines, in full harmony with Bologna’s long-standing spirit of experimentation and openness to new forms of art. The fusion of word and action, of personal life and artistic work, triggered a new way of understanding artistic practice—as a means of intervening in public space to enact social change, as exemplified by his activism against AIDS. This model reflects Bologna’s vocation for recognising the value of differences and for making space for an art that engages in dialogue with the city and its inhabitants. The retrospective curated by MAMbo is a precious experience that connects history, performance, and poetry, offering reflections that remain deeply relevant today.”

“John Giorno embodied, like few others, the possibility of a poetry that becomes an experience of the world—one that inhabits the body, the voice, and space, opening itself to the forms and languages of contemporary art. His work, now recognised as one of the most influential and cross-disciplinary of the second half of the twentieth century, stands at the crossroads of word and image, sound and gesture, spirituality and pop culture, constructing an aesthetic and performative universe that still resonates with surprising relevance today,” explains Lorenzo Balbi, Director of MAMbo and curator of the exhibition.

The exhibition retraces John Giorno’s multifaceted practice through several thematic sections, showing how the artist enhanced poetic language in its plastic, relational, and performative dimensions, pushing the word beyond the boundaries of visual art and into the realm of telecommunications networks. A large portion of his artistic production reuses excerpts from his poems, replicated across different media using carefully selected colours and an iconic typeface.

At the heart of the exhibition is Dial-A-Poem, the iconic interactive work through which the artist made recordings of poets, artists, musicians, and activists reading their own compositions accessible to the public via a telephone number to dial. This pioneering project, which transformed the telephone into a tool for the large-scale dissemination of poetry, was originally produced in 1969 and later presented in 1970 in the exhibition *Information* at the MoMA – Museum of Modern Art in New York. The work became a landmark of participatory conceptual art, expanding over the years to include 282 recordings by 132 authors, among them Patti Smith, Allen Ginsberg, and Amiri Baraka, and generating international editions such as Dial-A-Poem France, Dial-A-Poem Mexico, Dial-A-Poem Brazil, Dial-A-Poem Thailand, and Dial-A-Poem Switzerland.

On the occasion of 'John Giorno: The Performative Word', an Italian version of the work is created specifically for MAMbo: Dial-A-Poem Italy. The project involved over thirty contemporary Italian poets, selected by museum curator Caterina Molteni, who lent their voices to the sound project that guides the audience into the beating heart of Giorno's vision. Among them are Antonella Anedda, Domenico Brancale, Milo De Angelis, Valerio Magrelli, and Patrizia Valduga. As in the historical work, listening remains unpredictable: one call, an unexpected voice, a poetic fragment that transforms the experience into a private performance. A new telephone number, +39 051 0304278, will be activated for the duration of the exhibition and will be available free of charge, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to anyone.

Within the exhibition route, a section dedicated to archival materials—curated by Nicola Ricciardi in collaboration with Eleonora Molignani, with exhibition design by Studio EX (Andrea Cassi and Michele Versaci)—presents posters, letters, books, and contracts, some of which have never been exhibited before. These materials trace the evolution of John Giorno's trajectory between art and activism and place his experience in dialogue with that of other artists.

Confirming MAMbo's long-standing focus on performance, 'John Giorno: The Performative Word' highlights the performative dimension of the artist's poetic practice, situating it within the broader history of artistic experimentation in this field. From early visual poems and linguistic collages to the Electronic Sensory Poetry Environments of 1967, Giorno's research develops a true poetics of energy, founded on rhythm, breath, and vibration, anticipating themes that are central to today's intermedial arts: interdisciplinarity, the body as a vehicle of knowledge, and the relational dimension of the artwork. This performative tension is decisively intertwined with his political engagement—particularly within the LGBTQ+ community and during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, when he founded the AIDS Treatment Project—and with his adherence to Tibetan Buddhism, which introduces a profound meditative dimension into his work.

With 'John Giorno: The Performative Word', MAMbo pays tribute to an artist who reinvented poetry as gesture, rhythm, body, and presence: a truly multidimensional language capable of uniting politics, spirituality, and everyday life, restoring to the voice its irreducible power, and building a bridge between history and contemporaneity.

The exhibition is accompanied by a monograph published by Mousse Publishing. The volume brings together a wide selection of archival materials and essays by Lorenzo Balbi, curator of the exhibition; Drew Sawyer, curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York); poet Kyle Dacuyan; and curator Nicola Ricciardi, as well as a previously unpublished interview between Ugo Rondinone and Laura Hoptman, which together offer in-depth interpretative perspectives on Giorno's work.