

**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **APRIL 2015**

THE POETRY ISSUE

*Guest Edited by Bob Holman*

INTERVIEWS

*Judith Bernstein, John Giorno, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, and Glenn Goldberg*



# Promiscuous Compassion

in conversation

## John Giorno

WITH JARRETT EARNEST

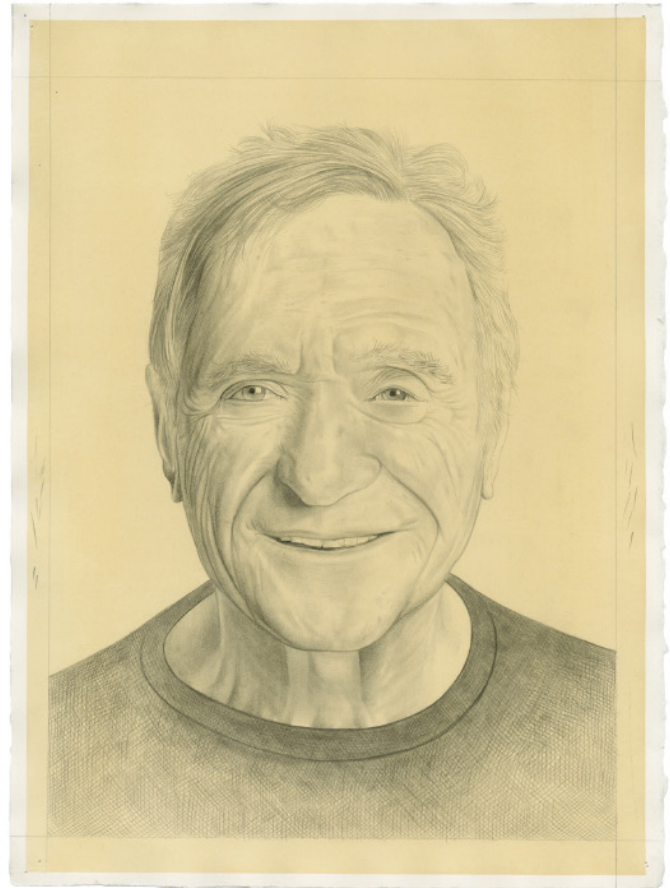
John Giorno has been a New York icon since he starred in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* in 1963. Since that time he has explored sound, image, performance, and video collages from a poet's perspective. On the occasion of Giorno's solo exhibition of text works *SPACE FORGETS YOU* at Elizabeth Dee (April 2–May 9, 2015) he met with Jarrett Earnest to discuss gossip, sexuality, and breathing.

**JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL):** I was talking to Bill Berkson about doing this interview and he said, "You can't not be candid with John," which I thought was a lovely thing to say about someone. One of the things that relates to is the gossip column called "Vitamin G" you wrote for Les Levine's magazine *Culture Hero*. I want to know how that came about.

**JOHN GIORNO:** It was at the suggestion of Les Levine. He had this magazine and was inviting people to write and wanted somebody to write a gossip column. I liked the idea in the sense that our minds in everyday life—then, like now—are filled with gossip—which is our history. We talked about people we knew and loved or hated, and gossip was play. For instance, at that time Claus and Patty Oldenberg were really good friends and were breaking up—and I was just telling the story. These brief stories appeared to me as found images. All were true, and once a number of people repeat it—gossip becomes hearsay and gets distorted—but generally it's a reflection of what happened. Nobody was writing this stuff down and it was art history, so that was an impetus. I got myself into so much trouble for doing it—lots of people were so resentful. There is a whole area of that ancient art world that has never forgiven me: "It's vulgar to write about such things!" I was quite young and even the writing was young, but it was an interesting thing to do. I've been writing my memoirs since my last book came out in 1994, and I've become a much better writer working at it every day. I have 570 pages, and it is almost finished. I have a really good memory, and can remember whole conversations. The gossip column was like images in a found poem.

**RAIL:** Some of the headlines were things like: "Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh on the Rocks?" "Does Dan Flavin have a girlfriend in Canada?" "Is Lucy Lippard making it conceptually with Seth Siegel?"

**GIORNO:** Well those are the kinds of things we would say to each other. Obviously Dan Flavin did have a girlfriend and everyone knew who it was, but no one could say it in print. Particularly in those years, the '60s, everybody was careful. It was still a very peculiar thing in the art world



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Zach Garlitos.

where people like Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns never wanted anyone to know they were gay. Okay—their friends knew, but it was not part of their artistic identities. Andy Warhol too in a sense. They were all victims of the homophobia of the abstract painters and the world in general. It was a pleasure to thumb my nose at all of it.

**RAIL:** This is about an art world that is small, and I think that makes it more interesting because you all had to deal with each other face to face.

**GIORNO:** Everybody knew everybody. I've been in this building since 1962, 222 Bowery. In 1963 on the top floor Wynn Chamberlain gave me a birthday party. Who was there? Everybody in the modern world in the last half of the 20th century, and it was only 80 people. Bob Rauschenberg came with Steve Paxton and arrived just after Jasper Johns departed, Andy and the seven pop artists and their girlfriends; Merce Cunningham and John Cage, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, Bill Berkson. They couldn't care less that it was my birthday. They knew I was the star of *Sleep* and they knew I was a young poet they had never read, but the reason they came was to be together. Frank Stella was married to Barbara Rose, and Frank really liked talking to Andy—they were both young and not yet famous, and you saw they infinitely respected each other—and loved to chatter about nothing. And on and on: Yvonne Rainer and Jill Johnston and the Judson Dance Theater. That was the art world of the early '60s.

**RAIL:** What use does gossip have in a social or artistic life?

**GIORNO:** Gossip in the memory is distorted snapshots of history. Like everyone, I like a *little* gossip. I wouldn't dream of doing it again. I'm writing the memoir, and remembering gossip from 50 years ago because it is imprinted in the mind. It is quite interesting.

**RAIL:** When did you start writing your memoirs proper?

**GIORNO:** When Andy Warhol died, 1987. When a friend dies, no matter who it is, particularly right after they are dead, you think about them and remember them so clearly. I was thinking about Andy, and remembering everything like I was watching a movie. I was not a prose writer, I'm a poet, but I said to myself, "you better write about the early '60s with Andy—25 years later—because if you wait another 25 years you are going to remember nothing." I wrote several memoir pieces that went into my book *You Got to Burn to Shine* in 1994. One of the important things for me is being able to remember conversations, and create plays within the memoir. It is really funny how the mind works—no doubt it gets distorted because it is passing through my mind—but if I can remember what I said, then I can remember



John Giorno, "SPACE FORGETS YOU" (2015). Screenprint and enamel on linen, 40×40". Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard.



what the other person said next, back and forth, and it doesn't come all at once, but over months. The dialogue shapes itself to make a point, revealing the relationship. William Burroughs was a good friend and we lived together at 222 Bowery, and I visited him often when he moved to Kansas. I started writing about him five years before he died. I wrote about August 1968, and the great moment when he came back from the democratic convention in Chicago and Kerouac was on the Buckley TV show. I wrote what I remembered being said back and forth. Then I tested it. I visited William in Kansas. We got up at 9 a.m., had breakfast—I made fried eggs and tea and we smoked joints—with the tape recorder on. I brought up '68, Chicago, and Kerouac, setting it up. I asked the questions I remembered asking, and he answered back. William said what I remembered him saying, because he was remembering his own thoughts and words. Almost everything was the same; occasionally adjectives or constructions were slightly different. It was so close and I was very relieved.

**RAIL:** Do you always treat memoir in the first person? Do you ever feel separate from the "you" of 40 years ago? Does it ever feel like you are writing about a different person?

**GIORNO:** It's like a cinemagraphic memory; it is imprinted. I'm writing about a movie I see in my mind. I do what I can within my small range, remembering feelings and what we said, set in brief descriptions of place, and try to keep it interesting. I just don't want it to be boring. From a distance it's easy to see the suffering and joy, mixed together all the time. The book is linear, a timeline, but I skip ahead in the decades to make a point.

**RAIL:** Do you do any form of research in your own archives to reconstruct the memories?

**GIORNO:** I have appointment diaries—just people I see. I've been doing that since at least '68. The by-the-month grids with the little boxes for each day; I can't believe that I wrote in those, but I did, year after year. I made a point of making them. It's just a list of names and times and dates, but that is all I need to remember it, especially because of the sequence—the flow of the days. These appointment diaries have been invaluable to me.

**RAIL:** I'm curious about your relationship to Jill Johnston, that there might be similarities in the flamboyant memoir as a style you two have.

**GIORNO:** We were very good friends in the very early years. I'm not sure when I met Jill, but maybe '61. I knew her in the context of this tiny downtown art scene. We were both outsiders and we felt safe together. Jill was friends with Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns too. In those early years we danced together at parties. I knew nothing about dancing but we would modern dance together, incredibly drunk and stoned. I just saw a movie that Andy made in 1963 of Jill dancing with Fred Herko on the roof of this building 222 Bowery. We liked talking and being together, protectively, for some reason.

**RAIL:** In one of Jill's memoirs, *Paper Daughter*, she said you were one of two people she called when she had her first schizophrenic episode and wasn't sure if it was a "vision" or not.

**GIORNO:** We were protecting each other, a safe spot in chaos. In the days and weeks after that I saw a lot of her because she was in Bellevue. They put her on Thorazine, which is a very difficult drug, it almost lobotomizes you—you don't have any problems and you don't have any mind. Then everyone got more concerned because she was like not functioning. At this point she was closer to Bob than to Jasper, and Bob visited her and helped with money.

**RAIL:** In Johnston's lesbian writing, and in your pieces like "Pornographic Poem," you both stand out as aggressively publicly gay, even by comparison to the rest of your scene. I wondered if that drew you together?

**GIORNO:** The story then goes back: I went to Columbia and graduated in '58 and I read a copy of *Howl* on spring break '56. It blew my mind. I was a sophomore and a creative writing major. This guy writes a poem that is a reflection of my mind—this is how I feel!—as opposed to being gay like Auden, or André Gide, or Jean Genet, not exactly reflections of my mind. That sets me on a path. Then I enter the art world in '61, a small scene and many of them are gay but they are all in the closet: Bob and Jasper and John Cage and Merce—it was verboten to talk about the fact that these were men who had sex together. They realized that being gay was the kiss of death professionally—they knew better than I did. My excessive gayness in my work compromised my work, however I'm not a painter and I don't have to support my market or an image of a career. I was just a poet, and aspired to be like William Burroughs and Allen Ginsburg, and that is a big plus. So Jill and I both had this crazy energy; I followed it and let gay images enter as part of the stream of consciousness of the poem, because everyone has erotic images in their mind as part of everyday.

**RAIL:** So because you weren't making any sellable things, and neither was Jill Johnston—

**GIORNO:** We had nothing to lose! In a certain sense I did, but I didn't care. In the 1960s the world was straight—run by straight people—and they didn't want gay things in their face. It was sort of okay if it was pussy and it was done *correctly*. I did all that so early I was through by 1980. My life was transformed by AIDS and sexuality was completely changed.

**RAIL:** In what ways did you see that change in the work, and in the forms of writing?

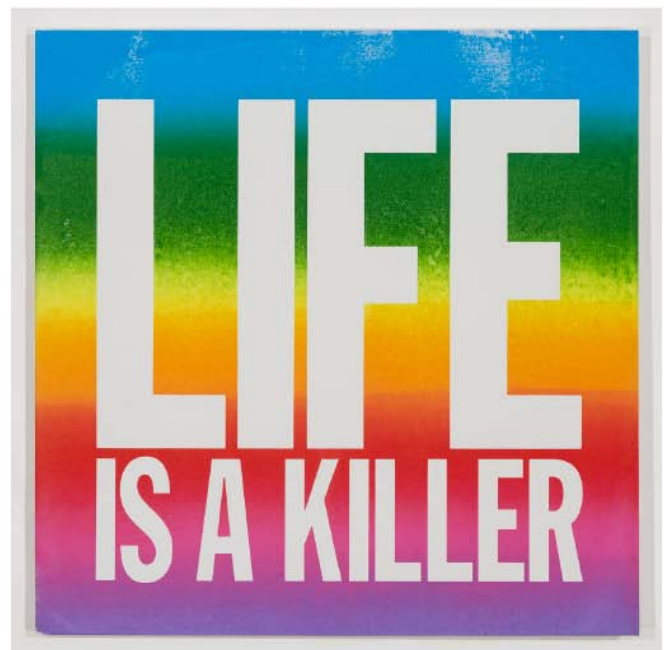
**GIORNO:** The glorious celebration of sex suddenly came to a catastrophic end—those countless people who died. Nobody even knows the numbers, a massacre for more than a decade—it is all forgotten and they're forgotten. Now it is just a different world.

**RAIL:** I've read references to the work you were doing during the AIDS crisis, but I have no idea really what all it entailed.

**GIORNO:** The first person I knew who died of what turned out to be AIDS was in May 1979. I was walking down the street and met a friend who said, "John, the most terrible thing happened to me, my lover died." "Oh, I'm so sorry." "He died in three months." "Oh, I'm so sorry." "You don't understand, he died the most horrible death." Then I kept hearing more stories like this, and by 1981 it was the "gay men's health disease," and was everywhere. Everything that we had labored for and aspired to, and had accomplished was lost. Sexual liberation was an issue that succeeded in our culture, but then suddenly it was destroyed. It went on year after year and got worse and worse. About '83 I started thinking about what I could do to help and the answer was basically to raise money to help people. At this point I was so tired of fundraising. For 25 years I was raising money for the different causes: Vietnam, lawyers for protesters and the political arrests, endless non-profit art projects, and then the Tibetan Buddhists arrived. But when I realized how desperately serious it was: so many of these guys got sick and three months later they could not function, no money, and could barely buy food. We had made a bit of money with the *Giorno Poetry Systems* LP records and we used that—I asked people like William Burroughs, Bob Mould, Laurie Anderson, and Patti Smith to donate their royalties—and we gave emergency grants. The '60s and '70s were the golden age of gay promiscuity—you made it with anyone you were attracted to, and scarcely had to talk—you never stopped and said "I don't know your name?" or "Where are you from?" or whatever. My thought was I should help people with AIDS the same way, with promiscuous love and compassion, just like when we fucked. We had lots of people helping to lead us to people needing help. It went on for decades up until the early 2000s when half the grants were going to poets who were sick with strokes or cancer. I finally said to myself, "John, you're a poet, not a health care provider." I just had that thought and it was finished; but I'm happy I did it over all those years.

**RAIL:** That completely changed your involvement with erotic poetry? I feel there aren't enough representations of the sexuality of gay men as they age. Have you thought about that as an aesthetic problem?

**GIORNO:** I don't feel like writing about sex so much, only occasionally. I've done everything I can do. But I love sex. I have a lover, Ugo Rondinone,



John Giorno, "LIFE IS A KILLER," (2015). Screenprint and enamel on linen, 40 × 40". Courtesy of the Artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard.



and we've been together 18 years and we have a great relationship. I have already written about us having sex.

RAIL: How did you start making picture-poems?

GIORNO: The first silkscreen prints were '68, and the impetus was investigating or inventing new venues for poetry, where the poem connects to the audience. I was doing the sound compositions, dial-a-poem, radio and video, and so silkscreen prints seemed like another venue for poetry. And I had a lot of examples. From Andy on, everyone did silkscreen. I have a giant show opening on October 18, 2015 at Palais de Tokyo in Paris. There is a selection of the work from 1968 to 2015. The first rainbow-roll silkscreen on paper was in 1973, but it was positive, the words were rainbow colors. I've done a series of paintings in this year, but inverse, the negative is the rainbow on canvas. The visual works are about creating an image that is, in a sense, iconic; that you recognize without reading. I can get away with four lines, anything more you have to start reading. The image is understood by just seeing.

RAIL: Bill Berkson once told me a story about Frank O'Hara doing a reading for educational television that was never aired. When he asked about it years later they said his voice was too fruity. I was always interested in that, and in voices in general. When did you start thinking of the specificity of your voice as a person—how it sounds and relates to the performance poetry?

GIORNO: It all started in 1962. I did those early found poems and Ted Berrigan had a magazine called *C* magazine and he published a couple of my poems. There was a union hall on 14th Street where there was a poetry reading for *C* magazine. I went because they were my first poems being published. I was sitting in the back having a good time and suddenly Ted announced, "Next is poet John Giorno." I had no idea I was going to read, and I had never read before in my life! I started shaking. They handed me the magazine and I opened trembling to the pages—you know when your legs are shaking like jelly—when I opened my mouth to breathe my lungs were locked. I read those poems, sweating and shaking violently, the words surging out of me, and walked back to my seat—and that was my first performance. Nothing much has changed after all these years except that I've learned how to work with that energy. That was a funny energy based on fear. Now I never get stage fright. I'm actually sleepy before I perform, close down, and when I go on the adrenaline wakes me up. Someone like William Burroughs came out like Steely Dan—his eyes like pin-points—seemingly fearless and all-powerful, and he'd go sit down and read. But he often told me that he felt like Jell-o before he went on stage and so he'd drink many vodka and sodas and smoke many joints. He was completely drunk and stoned, and frightened, which somehow allowed him to grab control—and it worked for him. It's a funny cliché but Burroughs used to say: "The greater the stage fright, the greater the performance." Not me, I freeze when I get frightened.

RAIL: I'm interested in the ways that dance, poetry, performance, and visual art were intermingling in complex ways in the '60s and '70s. How did the performances you saw inform your signature version of performance poetry?



John Giorno, "GOD IS MAN MADE" (2015). Screenprint and enamel on linen, 40 × 40". Courtesy of the Artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

GIORNO: It was in every aspect, starting in '61. As I said, nobody was famous, so you were just seeing what these people were doing on a daily basis, and the inspiration came from everybody—from Andy Warhol to George Segal. You saw how their minds worked, they had an idea and followed it. Year after year, I went to people's lofts, and saw what they were doing. William Burroughs and Brion Gysin were early influences using art and technology and they introduced me to sound poetry, *poesie sonore*. After knowing them for five or six months Brion said, "We should do a collaboration. I'll read your poems and we'll make a sound composition of it," and that was "Subway Poem," recording the sounds in the subway. Brion told me to send it to Bernard Heidsieck in Paris, which I did—this was the summer of '65. Bernard wrote and said that he liked it and was going to present it at the biennial at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. So this was my first show. And I went on doing it. Max Neuhaus and Steve Reich were friends of mine and I saw what they were doing with loops—making loops of their funny sounds—I thought, "Why don't I make loops of my words?" I worked with Bob Rauschenberg on *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, which led to working with Bob Moog, and then to Bob Bielecki. Everything was influenced by the artists and musicians—not the poets. Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery were only interested in you if you wrote like them, *particularly* like them. And the fact that I was friends with Andy Warhol—Frank hated Andy Warhol! And with the Beats—Allen Ginsburg was only interested in you if you wrote like the Beats, within their lyric tradition, and I didn't. Allen Ginsburg was a good friend but he loved me *because* I was famous for *Sleep*, and *Dial-a-poem*—and he hated my work. So what kind of influence was that on me? I hated those worlds. I absorbed a little of both, Modernism and the Beats, and then went on. However, the artists liked everything I did: "John, that's so great!" Whatever it was! The artists enabled me to have aspiration. Now skip to the present, 2015, Ugo Rondinone and I are together for 18 years and he is a great art teacher. I attribute my success to the fact that he criticizes me and teaches me. If I'm making a big mistake he says "don't!" and then I see what he means—that has been invaluable. Ugo is also a good editor. Scientific research has been done recently showing that lovers, partners, or married people, who support or complement each others' work have enormously beneficial results—they have profound effects on each others' work, which was linked to the tradition of the muse.

RAIL: With the collage work you were doing with Gysin and Burroughs, how do you see the relationship between the word as a thing: visually, sound, and performance?

GIORNO: The found poems of the '60s are similar to what I'm doing now, although I haven't used a found image in 30 years. They are basically constructed the same way: all reflections of mind, and the flow of the mind stream. If I'm lucky in a poem, my mind is no different than anyone else's. All these images endlessly arise and make a collage—sexuality is always there—it is the flow of our minds and that is very important to me. For the performances, it is important that each of the images are minimal enough so you aren't taken away by thinking about them, or get bored by them either. I rehearse them as I'm writing them: I hear the sound, as it gets developed into a poem. Every three or four words, every phrase has a melody. As I write I bring out the musical qualities, rehearsing it endlessly, everyday for months, rehearsing it to death, until they come from a different part of the mind. The poems take on a life of their own, becoming small songs. You perfect them by performing them, even their essences on the printed page.

RAIL: Are there things you started doing with your voice to vary or control the poems?

GIORNO: There are things I've done with poems all these years. One musical thing is that I do everything in what is called a downbeat. It never fails to work.

RAIL: How does that work in a poem?

GIORNO: I say a word in a certain pitch and every word after that is slightly lower on the musical scale. Going down or where the melody takes it, and ending on the lowest note with the end of the breath. It's a very natural thing. Performing the way I do, I use a lot of breath—from that first moment in '62 when I hyperventilated, and I developed a style of performance. I am not trained as a singer or actor, and had to invent it by myself. Also I am a Tibetan Buddhist in the Nyingma tradition, and there is a meditation called Tummo, the generation of heat. The thangka painting image is a yogi in the snow wearing a little cotton thing, sweating, because he is creating heat by controlling his breath. In the 1970s I was given this practice to do by my teacher Dudjom Rinpoche, and it involves moving the air up and down in the central part of the body, creating an upper vase, a middle vase, and large vase shaped thing in your belly—which creates the heat. I said to myself, "I've been doing this for years." Then I figured out how to do it better in my poems. So all those things come together. ☸