

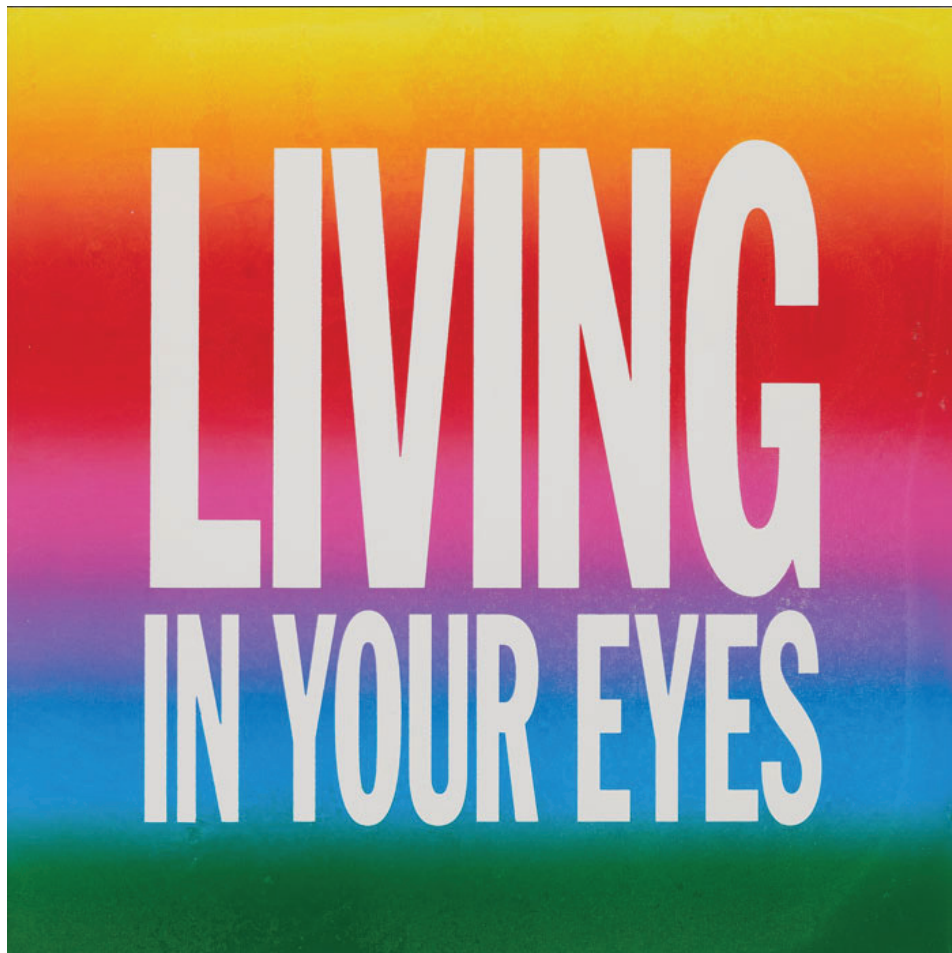
ARTNEWS

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DISPATCHES

ONLINE

**RISING FROM THE BUNKER:
THE WORLD CATCHES UP WITH JOHN GIORNO**



John Giorno, *Living in Your Eyes*, 2015.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY

On the morning of the last day of winter, the artist and poet John Giorno buzzed open the gate on the ground floor of the hulking Bowery building that he has called home for 49 of his 78 years and met me on the third floor, where he lives. I was there to talk to him about his upcoming exhibitions, a solo show at New York's Elizabeth Dee gallery and a retrospective at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. On the second floor of the building is William Burroughs's old apartment, which Burroughs called the Bunker. Giorno took over the space after Burroughs died in 1997. He meditates for a couple of hours each day. Giorno's been a Tibetan Buddhist since the early '70s and has filled the Bunker with Tibetan prayer rugs. A pornographic Keith Haring drawing hangs in the kitchen. He's kept Burroughs's bedroom intact—complete with Brion Gysin paintings on the wall, one canvas by Burroughs himself from a show at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in the mid-'80s, and a shooting-range target with a few holes in it. When I visited, Giorno was barefoot, wearing a black shirt and blue pants, and grinning, which is pretty much his default expression. He was about to brew some Assam tea. "I buy it in bulk," he said. "It has the highest caffeine content."

In his third-floor apartment, tattered oriental carpets are scattered around the room, which has lofty ceilings and an ornate brick fireplace, a vestige of the YMCA that originally filled the 1885 structure. (In later years, Fernand Léger, Mark Rothko, and Lynda Benglis spent time living or working there.) The room smelled of ash and incense, mixed with a healthy amount of marijuana.

It turned out that we had both gone to Columbia College, and Giorno got to talking about life in New York when he was a student. "It was '54 to '58, I had a girlfriend—I was gay, but I had a girlfriend—and every weekend we drank downtown, so we'd go to the White Horse to see Dylan Thomas, who was a great influence on me," he said rapid-fire, "and then we'd go to the old Cedar Tavern"—the famed hangout of the Abstract Expressionists—"and I didn't like the abstract painters. They were fat old drunken men—so intellectual. We'd arrive so drunk at one in the morning down there."

Instead, Giorno fell in with the rising generation, artists like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol who were using the stuff of popular culture to make their art. (Giorno would also date all three of them.) "I was discovering the use of found images," he said. "I, like everybody, had gone to school and studied art and Duchamp and done all that, but that was not the influence. It's because I said, 'If Andy can do it, or they can, why can't I do it?'"

He began writing poems with snippets of vernacular speech and stream-of-consciousness thought. He released records and tried out new technologies. In 1968 he developed his Dial-A-Poem system, which allowed people to call a number and hear recordings of poets reading their work. The year before he had begun taking especially pungent lines from his poems and silk-screening them onto canvas with screaming capital letters, turning poems into paintings. He has kept at it ever since.

Tea saucer in hand, Giorno slipped on a pair of sandals and led me down one floor to his painting studio, another soaring space with huge windows that let in sunlight and a view of the New Museum across the street. The walls were lined with the square rainbow-striped paintings that were about to be sent over to Elizabeth Dee for a show that runs through May 9. Each was emblazoned with a choice line from a Giorno poem: "A HURRICANE IN A DROP OF CUM" and "THANKS 4 NOTHING," which have appeared on a number of his paintings over the years, and a new one—"GOD IS MANMADE."

"They have to be automatically iconic," Giorno said, when I asked him how he homes in on phrases. He

keeps them short and sweet, so that the message arrives all at once. “You can’t read them,” he said. “If you read them, you’re lost.” Ed Ruscha and Jenny Holzer come to mind, but Giorno’s works refuse the cool subtlety of the former and the menacing ambiguity of the latter. They address the viewer directly: “JUST SAY NO TO FAMILY VALUES.”



John Giorno, *Space Forgets You*, 2015 (left), and *Prefer Crying in a Limo to Laughing on a Bus*, 2015 (right). COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY

Giorno has a much-quoted line about how he realized in the 1960s that “poetry was 75 years behind painting and sculpture, music, and dance,” and his career has, in essence, been an effort to help poetry catch up, by broadening its subjects and experimenting restlessly.

So, has poetry finally caught up? For the first time in our conversation, he paused, considering the question for a moment. “I think this has been a golden age of poetry that has so changed the world that basically most poetic traditions are dead, happily,” he said. “Poetry doesn’t belong to a specific school; it belongs to the wisdom of the mind. So you can do anything, which is what I decided to do.

“Texting is great,” he continued. “It’s using words in another way. Everyone in this world is using words as if they were poets, seeing them carefully. This is miraculous!”

The art world has also finally caught up with Giorno. In September, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris will open a sprawling retrospective of his work. The show is being organized by Giorno’s boyfriend of 18 years, the artist Ugo Rondinone, who is about 30 years his junior. The two met when Rondinone stopped by the apartment to solicit Giorno’s help on a project. “Instead of collaborating, we became lovers,” Giorno said.

(Rondinone plays art mentor for his boyfriend. “Just the way you would have a teacher at school,” Giorno said. “When I make mistakes and I don’t get it, I get screamed at, as you should! Then I get it. Because I’m dense, like everybody.”)

The Paris show will be filled with poems, paintings, and ephemera, and Giorno has spent the past four years digging through his vast archive, having thousands of photos and a few films digitized, including a reel that Warhol shot while he and Giorno were vacationing in Connecticut, right before making his five-hour film *Sleep* (1963), which stars a nude Giorno doing just that.

“There’s this footage of me asleep in a hammock,” Giorno said. “It’s quite a long thing of [Warhol] not knowing what he’s doing. Sometimes it’s two inches from my skin. He was just sketching in a kind of way. It was one of those 99-degree days where it was so humid and I had such a hangover.”

Giorno lives a comparably low-key existence now. He moves from one floor to another throughout his day, switching from writing to painting and back again. He rehearses his poems every day. And he bikes around the neighborhood running errands, even in the dead of winter.

Seventy-eight is late for an artist to be having his first major museum retrospective. “I’m not so aggressive about making things happen,” Giorno said, when I asked him how his first art shows came about. “I do everything. I’ve spent a lifetime doing everything. I just sort of let it happen.”

Rondinone picked the name for the Paris show. “I’ve been performing for 50 years, so everybody has heard me perform,” Giorno explained, and so for the title, his boyfriend used a phrase that he had heard countless times: “I love John Giorno.”

- *Andrew Russeth*

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