

Obituary



Great appeal: John Giorno had that rare ability to connect authentically across the generations

John Giorno

The American poet, performance artist, Aids activist, and William Burroughs and Andy Warhol collaborator

I vividly remember my first studio visit with John Giorno. We met at Independent Art Fair in 2014. Max Wigram was presenting John's 1980s text paintings on black vinyl, and John made an appearance with a groundbreaking performance of poetry. He used his body as a high-frequency physical instrument for bringing his original text to life. It was moving, and game changing. Not long after, I was invited to his studio.

My timing was fortunate. The gallerist Nicole Klagsbrun, an early adopter and identifier of great talent, had just retired from representing living artists, including John. John might be up for a gallery show in New York, and I just might be the right gallery. As I approached his studio on 222 Bowery, I had no idea that I was about to

enter a new world. I scanned the doorbell to call him. The bell read: 1. Bunker, 2. Giorno Poetry, 3. Lynda Benglis, 4. Michael Goldberg, 5. John Giorno. What a building! I was astonished to learn that the "Bunker" bell was for John's dear friend and collaborator William Burroughs' apartment in the basement. After Burroughs' death, John had kept his friend's room exactly in its original condition, complete with a typewriter next to the bed.

Allure and humour

John greeted me with his energetic hyperkinetic presence and lovely smile that bordered on a laugh. He was a legendarily beautiful man, sexy and well into his late 70s now. He still had the gift of allure and humour, appealing to both men and women.



John's art and mission resonated and will continue to resonate. His work will forever be accessible yet deeply profound

He spoke with a lively cadence and candour that was as invigorating and performative as his writing. We covered everything: the conditions of making art rather than the art itself, the writing process, non-profit activities, attending to friends, working rituals at certain times of day or specific locations (he had a drawing table in his husband's uptown studio as well as one of his three units at 222), experimenting with watercolour, and the collaboration he so valued with Bushwick Print Lab to work on his canvas paintings.

John said he had a lot of work in his mind that he had yet to produce and show. We talked about his audience and curatorial support, but it was refreshingly well placed in larger conversations about the world as an activist and artist, and from the perspective of someone who has seen it all. When he sat, he clasped his hands in a gesture of politeness, but with an intense physicality that suggested he might jump out of his chair at any moment. He was not someone who seemed to stand still.

Solo show at Elizabeth Dee Gallery

I offered John a solo show at my gallery, and to my absolute surprise and delight, he cheerily accepted on the spot. I later learned that this was no snap decision. He thought about these things greatly. He was someone guided by energy and inspired by a higher cause.

At the solo show, John was revealing his new rainbow paintings. When he came to arrange the work around the walls, he asked everyone to give feedback and allowed every person in the room to weigh in, including the team and installers. We all gradually became part of a circle of trust around the work. It was like a dance or performance, but in a knowing way, realising that as a spectator one was also part of the performance. Then after a while he said, "this works". I suggested giving the team a few hours to install, and then have another session of comparing and swapping works. He said he had to go and do something. He never came back to finish and confirm a final installation. It seemed that once he saw there was harmony in the space, he did not need to see the final version. He just showed up for the opening and greeted the entire downtown art world. It was fabulous. That was John.

Intergenerational friendships

He had a rare ability to connect authentically across generations. It is unclear how millennials and Generation Z started following him in the early days of Instagram and Snapchat, but the connection was true and tangible. John expressed something that they saw in their own lives. Younger and younger followers were present whenever he or the work appeared, documenting the journey on social media.

One memorable example of his ability to connect was when his devoted and brilliant husband, the artist Ugo Rondinone, created a retrospective of John's work at Palais de Tokyo in 2015. John was scheduled to perform just days after the Paris attacks in November. While much of the city was under lockdown, he was undeterred from getting on a plane to Paris. Nothing would stop him from being there, and he said it ended up being one of the most moving performances he ever gave. The sentiment in the room from the standing-only crowd heightened the power of that experience. John's words seemed to capture the emotion and anguish of the moment, serving to unify and amplify people's feelings in the room.

I find solace in the fact that all of us can, at any moment, access the diversity and power of John Giorno's work. Trends around the dispersal of papers relating to an artist's work are in perfect alignment with his core beliefs that his work is for everyone. This is why his art and mission resonated and will continue to resonate. John's work will forever be accessible yet deeply profound. His work will forever define the different ways we face our various futures. It will forever reflect what it means to be human.

Elizabeth Dee

• John Giorno, born 4 December 1936, died 11 October 2019

In memoriam

HILDEGARD BACHERT, the art dealer and co-director of Galerie St Etienne, New York, died on 17 October, aged, 98. Bachert grew up in Mannheim until the Nazis came to power when her parents took her to the US. After high school, she worked at the Nierendorf Gallery in Manhattan and was then hired in 1940 by Otto Kallir to work as his secretary at the Galerie St Etienne. In that same year, she organised the first solo exhibition of the American naïve painter, Grandma Moses (1860-1961), whose nostalgic paintings of New England farming scenes rose from \$3 to \$4 each to more than \$10,000. Bachert also specialised in the works of Käthe Kollwitz and went on to promote artists such as Paula Modersohn-Becker, Richard Gerstl, Lea Grundig, Jeanne Mammen and Sue Coe. When Otto Kallir died in 1978, she became co-director of the gallery with his granddaughter, Jane Kallir, with whom she completed Otto's catalogue raisonné of Egon Schiele.

E.A. CARMEAN, the former director of the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, and Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Tennessee, died on 12 October, aged 74. Born in Springfield, Illinois, Carmean took his BA from MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois, and then an MA in 1971 from the University of Illinois, writing his thesis on Robert Motherwell. In 1974 he was appointed the founding curator of the department of 20th-century art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. There he commissioned five large works for the atrium by Alexander Calder, Joan Miró, Motherwell, Henry Moore and Anthony Caro. He added works by Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, Lee Krasner, André Derain and Frank Stella. In 1984 he became the director of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and from 1992 to 1997 he was the director of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. In 1998 he entered the Memphis Theological Seminary and was ordained an Episcopalian priest in 2002. He served on the staff of St George's Episcopal Church in Germantown, Tennessee, and in 2005 was appointed a canon of the diocese with responsibility for art and architecture.

STEFAN EDLIS, a plastics millionaire, collector and benefactor, died on 15 October, aged 94. Born in Vienna, Edlis fled Austria to the US where he served in the US Navy during the Second World War. In 1965 he founded Apollo Plastics in Chicago which manufactured mass-produced plastic objects and made his fortune. He began collecting works of art and amassed a collection by artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Prince, Robert Rauschenberg, Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol. In 1991 he bought Jeff Koons's *Rabbit* for a then record-breaking \$945,000. In 2015 he and his wife, Gael Neeson, donated 42 works, valued at more than \$500m, from his collection to the Art Institute of Chicago, an event that became the subject of a 2018 HBO documentary, *The Price of Everything*.

HUANG YONG PING, the Chinese-French avant-garde and polemic artist, died on 20 October, aged 65. Born in Xiamen, Huang was initially a self-taught artist inspired by the works of Joseph Beuys, John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. After the Cultural Revolution, he graduated in 1982 from the Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, and in 1986 formed the Xiamen Dada, a Postmodern, avant-garde protest group. In 1989 he travelled to Paris to take part in the *Magicians of the Earth* exhibition at the Pompidou Centre. Learning of the Tiananmen Square massacre, he exiled himself from China. He became a French citizen in 1999 and represented France at the 48th Venice Biennale in the same year. His works, often massive installations and sculptures—such as his *Empires* (2016), 305 shipping containers surmounted by a Napoleonic bicorne hat encircled by a 254-metre-long snake—reflect Chinese philosophies, notably Buddhism and Taoism, the complex relations between East and West and the role of art in history and culture.