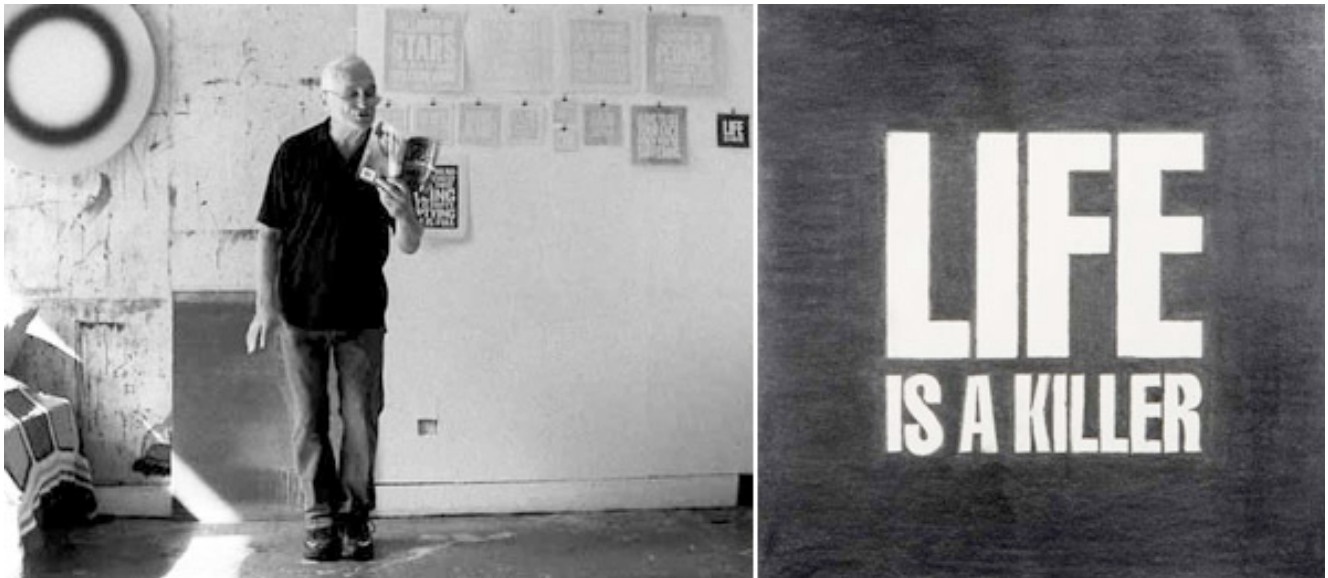


ARTFORUM

John Giorno
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Left: **Rirkrit Tiravanija, *JG Reads*, 2008**, still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 10 hours 6 minutes. Right: **John Giorno, *LIFE IS A KILLER*, 2008**, pencil on paper, 6 1/2 x 6 1/2".

For over forty years, the poet John Giorno has explored the media through which poetry is disseminated. In 1963, Giorno was the subject of Andy Warhol's Sleep, and recently Giorno collaborated with Rirkrit Tiravanija on the latter's work JG Reads, 2008, which was shown at Gavin Brown's Enterprise November 22–December 20. An exhibition of Giorno's artwork is on view at Almine Rech gallery in Paris January 10–February 25, 2009.

THE NAME OF THE SHOW IS "Life Is a Killer," which is also the title of a poem of mine from 1982. I wouldn't have chosen it, but Ugo [Rondinone] liked it. I was going to name it after one of several new poems—"Thanks for Nothing" or "It Doesn't Get Better." I gave Ugo a 1986 painting I did of *Life Is a Killer*; it's in his loft, he sees it every day, and I think he's fixed on it. I'm very permissive when it comes to the people I work with. I just put out a new book of poems selected from 1962 to 2007 called *Subduing Demons in America*. The idea for the title, taken from a poem I did in 1974, belonged to my editor, Marcus Boone. I said, "Marcus, I would never choose that title now, in 2008." And he said, "No, John, that's a great title for a life's work." The thing is, when people suggest things, you know why. You trust the people you work with.

There will be fifty-two drawings and eighteen paintings and eleven huge wall stencils in the show at Almine Rech. I'll also be performing at the opening. I can perform endlessly. For Rirkrit [Tiravanija]'s piece *JG Reads* at Gavin Brown, Rirkrit wanted me to perform for forty hours. I said, "What a great idea!" The film is black-and-white and 16 mm, so of course it evoked Andy Warhol. One of Rirkrit's ideas—not his first, but one of the more prominent ones—was to remake *Empire*, which is twenty-four hours long. In the end, he decided that duration was too much, though, so we did what we did—eleven hours.

It takes me months and months to write a poem; as I work with it, I see how it sounds, and I say the words live, and I begin to memorize it as I write it. Do you know how you remember a pop song? You're not thinking about it: The words are in the sound. It comes from an inexplicable place; every time you perform, you're doing it for the first time! When I did Rirkrit's piece, there were poems I hadn't performed for twenty-five years, poems from the early '80s, like "Exiled in Domestic Life," that are really angry punk poems. When I'd rehearse, at 8 or 9 AM, everything would come back. Whoosh! Anger included.

My various projects—the poem paintings, LPs and CDs, Dial-a-Poem, and the written poems—all have the same purpose: to connect to an audience. A poem is wisdom in a few words. I'm not sure where the words originate, but sometimes it does feel very much like one's a vehicle, that they're coming out so fast that you're not even *thinking* about them. From emptiness, form arises. I have this theory about when a poem works. When you perform a poem and the audience is enraptured, you just feel it. It's not necessarily that it's a great poem; the audience thinks that they're hearing these words, but in my mind that's not so. What they're hearing is the reflection of something in their mind. Any great poem—any great work—is just a mirror held up to someone else's mind.

The greatness of the poet is to get the audience to connect with a poem. As poems grow older and enter the museum of history—the Modern Museum of Poetry, or what have you—they lose it. Take Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Being a gay man reading it the year it was written, 1956, he blew me away; it was the first time anyone had said words that related to my mind. Now, at every university across the country, I hear these kids say, "John, I'm glad it did it for you, but . . ."

If you look back over the past thousand years, there were often never more than a hundred people who heard your poem. With Baudelaire, they'd only print his poems in one hundred books, and maybe three hundred people read them, and yet he was the most famous poet in France. Our generation changed things. Years ago, a young woman came up to Patti Smith and said, "Patti, I'm a poet. What should I do?" And Patti said, "If you want to have more than twenty people in the audience, get yourself a rock band." The young woman turned out to be Chan Marshall of Cat Power. I think that's happened to countless people: Jim Carroll, Lou Reed, Tom Waits; it's that Pop thing of connecting to a large audience.

I just have one bottom line: no compromise in terms of content. In my case, I'm a gay man, so gay and political content always finds its way into my work. I've always felt very strongly about it. I was there with Andy Warhol in 1962–63, with Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper [Johns], and it just drove me crazy that you could not be gay in their work. There we were, Andy and I were in love, and Bob and Jasper—each of them were lovers of mine at one point during the '60s—and gay content could not enter their work. They were artists who were poor, and they needed to sell paintings, and they could not be labeled as a gay artist at that time. In 1962, all those abstract painters *hated* Andy Warhol. Phil Pearlstein tried to champion him, but they all hated him because he was just a fag and he did that "appalling" art. And here I was coming out of the world with Burroughs and Ginsberg, who had championed being gay. Poetry never made any money, so there was nothing to lose! That's why I thought it was so heroic for Keith [Haring] to put these dicks in his paintings. Keith compromised himself a bit; he broke those rules, and Andy didn't. Andy pushed the envelope as far as he could, but he never crossed over. And we know why—because then he wouldn't be Andy.

— *As told to David Velasco*