



John Giorno:  
*THANX 4 NOTHING*,  
2009, oil on canvas,  
12 inches square;  
at Nicole Klagsbrun.

## JOHN GIORNO

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN

"LIFE IS A KILLER" isn't a sign crafted by some backwoods visionary, nor is it graffiti scrawled by an urban malcontent on a subway platform. It's both title and content of a 12-by-12-inch 2009 painting by John Giorno included in "Black Paintings and Drawings," his first-ever solo gallery show in New York. (There have been several recently in Europe.) Giorno, who has accrued a lifetime of street cred as a poet, bandleader, entrepreneur and practitioner of meditation, is now also a painter of hand-rendered poems. The square canvases and works on paper, ranging from 12 to 20 inches on a side, may recall the scale and Pop immediacy of an album cover, but these gritty proclamations are no nostalgia act.

The text in *LIFE IS A KILLER*, its unpainted letters framed by determined brushstrokes of bible-black oil paint, includes the bold white sans-serif LIFE logo familiar (to some) from the magazine that was once this country's go-to source for news and pictures. *EATING THE SKY* (2009) emerges more faintly from a rainy gray wash, while the black

background of the ecstatic *MILLIONS OF STARS COME INTO MY HEAD WELCOME HOME* (2009) is left unfinished on the right side—lunch break, or abandonment? One of only two drawings, *EVERYONE IS A COMPLETE DISAPPOINTMENT* (2010) employs a buildup of fine cross-hatching to establish a gray field around dropped-out white lettering. The gallery's walls served as billboards on which were painted the entire collection of messages; the canvases were hung on them in a manner originated by Andy Warhol in his oft-referenced society-portraits-over-cow-wallpaper exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1979.

Giorno rode the first wave of information-age optimism, creating Dial-A-Poem in 1968, a service offering verse over the telephone. When his poetry was silkscreened onto paper for Kynaston McShine's 1970 "Information" show at MoMA, it was hardly the first time language served as content for art. But Giorno's contribution was distinctive. Both his works for the wall and two

poems in the "Information" catalogue employed a font, suggestive of tabloid headlines, that has come to be identified with Giorno (just as Conceptualists Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry each have preferred typefaces). While neither of Giorno's "Information" poems has lost any of its relevance, the second is uncannily pertinent, urging us to choose vegetarianism over the bad economics of beef consumption.

Not all cultural avatars transitioning from page to gallery wall do so with the style and urgency displayed here. William Burroughs's late, bullet-riddled plywood collages felt like consumerist memorabilia for Burroughs cultists. Giorno's paintings, like those of his generational counterpart Mel Bochner, often indulge in welcome crankiness as a response to the art world's party's-back-on mood. Is *THANX 4 NOTHING* (2009) a wisecrack or a prayer? Having never left us, Giorno's is not a voice in the wilderness. But with these paintings he's sounding—and looking—more and more like a prophet.

—Tim Maul