

john giorno

I wanted to do more than write poems. I wanted to broaden the ways that poets could connect with audiences. — John Giorno

life is a killer

august 29— october 10,
2026

opening
august 29, 12 — 4 pm

kurimanzutto presents **John Giorno: LIFE IS A KILLER**, the first solo show in Mexico City dedicated to the pioneering American artist, poet, and activist John Giorno (1936–2019). Bringing together works on canvas, paper, wall paintings, audio recordings, film, as well as live performance, the exhibition examines Giorno's prolific creative practice through language. The show takes its title from one of Giorno's most iconic recurring poetic statements, **LIFE IS A KILLER**, a phrase that reappears across paintings, recordings, performance and publications, reflecting his conviction that a poem did not end on the page but instead took on new life and new meaning each time it moved into another medium.

Some of these wall paintings and works on canvas belong to the **Poem Paintings**, a series Giorno began in the late 1980s that transformed language into bold visual compositions rendered in stark black and white or vivid rainbow colors. They draw on the graphic language of Pop Art and the fertile exchange between poetry and the visual arts in New York, shaped by Giorno's close relationship with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Andy Warhol. His lifelong commitment to Tibetan Buddhism also informed the idea that language could continually be transformed through repetition, scale, color, and context.

Across these works, phrases such as *LIFE IS A KILLER*, *SPACE FORGETS YOU*, and *EVERYONE GETS LIGHTER* reveal how shifts in scale and color shape how we experience recurring language. Responding directly to the building's architecture, these pieces extend Giorno's poems beyond the canvas, allowing language to inhabit the gallery space.

The exhibition also includes a selection of silkscreen prints from the late 1960s and early 1970s based on newspaper headlines, magazine articles, personal advertisements and Giorno's own writing. Two of these works employ the artist's signature double-column format, inviting viewers to read poems aloud while echoing the importance of voice, rhythm, repetition, and layered language.

Performance remained central to Giorno throughout his life. At the center of the gallery, a suspended microphone hangs above a raised platform that serves as a stage for live

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performances. Surrounding it are four turntables developed with artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, which play vinyl records released by **Giorno Poetry Systems (GPS)**, the nonprofit organization Giorno founded in 1965. Among the recordings are selections spanning the history of GPS, including *The Dial-A-Poem Poets: Totally Corrupt* (1973), *Big Ego* (1978), and *Life Is a Killer* (1982). Visitors are invited to select and play the LPs themselves, allowing up to four recordings to play simultaneously. As voices overlap throughout the gallery, poems become an ever-changing soundscape shaped by each visitor's choices. This reflects Giorno's commitment to expanding poetry beyond the page, and connecting it with new audiences in everyday life.

To explore Giorno through performance even further, the gallery's project room presents **Tiravanija's *untitled 2008 (john giorno reads)* (2008)**. Filmed over several days at Giorno's home on 222 Bowery in New York, the ten hour film follows the artist performing poems, memoirs, and music spanning five decades of his career. It reflects Tiravanija's desire to preserve the vitality of Giorno's performance while documenting a long friendship and creative dialogue between the two artists. It also offers visitors an intimate glimpse into where Giorno lived, worked, and performed.

In the spirit of GPS's longstanding peer-to-peer model—in which artists are invited to present the work of another artist they admire—the nonprofit has invited **Abraham Cruzvillegas**, who in turn has invited **La Bruja de Texcoco** to perform live on September 9 at 222 Bowery. Much like Giorno, this event extends GPS's mission of connecting artists, ideas and audiences across generations and geographies.

In honor of Giorno's legacy, the exhibition is accompanied by a program of readings, performances, workshops, and public events developed with artists, poets, and performers across Mexico City. **La Americana**, an independent bookstore specializing in books from the continent, will lead a poetry translation workshop in which poets, editors, and writers will read works by Giorno and his contemporaries while producing new Spanish translations that embrace the latter as a creative and interpretive act. These works will be performed in the gallery, broadcast live via Montez Press Radio, and published in a zine by **La Americana** and kurimanzutto libros. Additional readings and performances will also take place throughout the exhibition.

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The gallery bookstore will present an archive of photographs, publications, documents, recordings, and ephemera spanning Giorno's life and practice. Drawing on material related to **Dial-A-Poem**, **Giorno Poetry Systems**, Buddhism, political activism, and his many artistic collaborations, the archive reveals how poetry, performance, and community became inseparable throughout John Giorno's career.

about the artist

John Giorno (1936–2019) was a pioneering American artist, poet, activist whose groundbreaking practice transformed the relationship between poetry, visual art, music and performance. He was born and lived in New York all his life, where he was a central figure in the city's postwar artistic and literary scene alongside poets Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, as well as artists Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. In 1963, Warhol cast Giorno as the sole subject of his landmark film *Sleep*. This marked the beginning of a lifelong personal and artistic relationship between the two artists. Throughout his career, Giorno challenged normative distinctions between artistic disciplines, expanding poetry beyond the printed page into visual art, sound, performance and public spaces. His practice was deeply informed by political activism, including LGBTQ+ visibility, HIV/AIDS awareness, anti-war movements and a lifelong commitment to artistic collaboration.

In 1965, Giorno founded **Giorno Poetry Systems (GPS)**, the nonprofit organisation that continues to preserve and advance his legacy. Four years later, he launched **Dial-A-Poem**, the pioneering public art project that made poetry accessible to hundreds of thousands of people by telephone and later became one of the defining works in the Museum of Modern Art's landmark exhibition *Information* (1970).

Recent solo exhibitions include **John Giorno: The Performative Word**, MAMbo, Bologna (2026); *Dial-A-Poem Hong Kong*, M+, Hong Kong (2026); *John Giorno: No Nostalgia*, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles (2025); *John Giorno: a labor of LOVE*, Triennale Milano (2025); *Welcoming the Flowers*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2025); *SIT IN MY HEART AND SMILE*, Moraes-Barbosa Collection, São Paulo (2025); *John Giorno: Jasmine Burn*, kurimanzutto, New York (2024); and *John Giorno Dial-A-Poem*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2023).

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Giorno's work has been exhibited internationally at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Palais de Tokyo, M+, Museo Jumex, Museo Reina Sofía, MAMbo, and kurimanzutto. More than six years after his death, his work continues to inspire new generations of artists through its enduring exploration of language, performance, activism and collective participation.

About Giorno Poetry Systems

Giorno Poetry Systems (GPS) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1965 by the artist, poet and activist **John Giorno (1936–2019)**. Built on the principle of artists supporting other artists, GPS champions the work of poets, artists and musicians while fostering collaboration across disciplines.

Through exhibitions, performances, publications, recordings, grants and public programmes, GPS creates platforms that amplify artists' voices and encourage creative exchange.

These artists curate events, select releases for its record label, serve on grant juries and contribute to public programmes.

Since becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 1974, GPS has also preserved and advanced John Giorno's legacy, maintaining an extensive archive and supporting research on the symbiotic relationship between poetry, visual art, music and performance, which has shaped downtown New York since the 1960s.

Today, GPS continues to expand Giorno's belief that poetry belongs beyond the printed page—living through performance, collaboration and public exchange.

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