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Untold Narratives

13.09. - 19.10.2023

Galerie Eva Presenhuber

curated by Giorno Poetry Systems

Artists: John Giorno

John Giorno: God Complex

Berlin, May 22, 2024

Dear John,

Blame it on Anthony! He wanted me to curate a show of your work. And what did I come up with? Right, a show about the big E-G-O. I titled it God Complex, paradoxically given your life-long devotion to Buddhism. However, the show does embody the spirit of Buddhism by presenting the joys & doubts of life and our micro-macro relationship to materiality and immateriality, whatever that means. But before I dive into the supposed meaning of this show, I have some confessions to make.

Unfortunately, we never met in person, John, but every morning I wake up and see your work, I want to cum in your heart. It was 2018 and I fell desperately in love with a man. For a brief moment, that love was reciprocated, only to be reconsidered seconds later. Have you ever heard of ghosting? Basically, it's an easy way out to avoid any form of confrontation. Slide to the left and move on, so to speak. I was devastated, heartbroken, and wept for weeks. Why in God's (yes, God's) name did this hit me so hard? The week after I was invited to participate in a panel on „cancel culture“ (pun intended, I guess), I dragged myself out of bed and attended. During the rather uninspiring event (just cancel panel discussions as a format, period), I kept staring at your piece hanging on one of the gallery walls. It was the perfect embodiment of my feelings at the time, and maybe even of me as an emotionally and sexually driven person. I went to the gallerist and bought it.

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Did I mention that I used to be an artist? When I read hurricane in a drop of cum, I thought of one of the pieces I presented in my graduation show at the sculpture department of the Maastricht Art Academy, which was simply a dirty towel titled Millions of Lives Lost. When I told the committee that the towel contained me and my lover's semen from the past year, their faces cringed. See how self-absorbed I am?

I went to the infamous 222 Bowery. Anthony showed me around and we even happened to see the space that used to be Rothko's studio. The place reeks of history! We visited your apartment, which felt very peaceful and very you, at least the you I imagined. We went to the Bunker and visited Burroughs' bedroom, which, not surprisingly, was a dark experience. I had no idea the man was so obsessed with guns! I laughed when I read your memoir describing the sexual encounter you had with Burroughs. God knows (yes, God is man-made, according to you) you fucked around, John! But William Burroughs? That is where I would draw the line. Physically, I have always mixed-up Burroughs with Marcel Duchamp. I have no idea why. But if I had to choose, I would definitely sleep with Duchamp, even though their minds feel alike.

Anyway, I am babbling. Let's get back to the show. I chose works that literally deal with scale, in every sense of the word. Things that are both tangible and abstract. It is concrete poetry in the most sculptural sense, but it begs the mind to wonder. I've included Dial-A-Poem in two versions – the original one you made, and the one Ugo made with Austrian poems when he did his show at the Secession in 2015. There's a very early print from 1968 called Black Cock that I'm excited to share with the audience. Typically, the show ends with one of your last pieces, Big Ego, which is presented in the dark basement space with a selection of your sound poems. I hope the show captures your spirit well. It has certainly become a very personal endeavor for me, hence the decision to write you a letter.

With much love and respect,

Krist

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New York, June 3, 2024

Dear John,

To say that I think and talk about you every single day is weirdly not an overstatement. I promise it's not creepy, either. I see your handwriting scrawled on countless pieces of paper in the archive, I hear your voice coming from the record player, and your words, painted on canvas, hang behind my desk as I write this—Carnations Gloriously Self-Serving—in bright orange and yellow. Most of all, what I see is your spirit of generosity in all of its many forms.

Big Ego. No city has a bigger ego than New York City, the city you called home for pretty much your entire life. This place has a huge God Complex—borderline pathological. It's obsessed with itself. I mean...the Empire State? On St. Marks Street, tourists buy T-shirts that say New York Fucking City or, more to the point, Fuck you, you fucking fuck. It's a my-way-or-the-highway kind of town.

What I find so remarkable about your life in this incredible and impossible city is that despite all of its aggressions, you managed to tap into its more compassionate flipside. You found ways to replace the bravado with a vulnerability that comes with letting go. You believed in solidarity and mutual aid. In what comes with being-in-the-trenches-together. Tragically, it was far from a level playing field, since racism, sexism, homophobia, and other systemic forms of violence inevitably tip the scales, benefiting some at the expense of others—much of which you encountered yourself.

And so you invented systems of support. The Giorno Poetry Systems. For decades, GPS provided a glimpse into a New York where peers show up for each other. Beyond just being a friend, lover, or collaborator with other artists, you wanted to know what they needed in order to make the art, the poetry, or the music they wanted to make. As a result, GPS put the voices of hundreds of poets on a phone line, it put hundreds of songs on its record label, it gave out hundreds of thousands of dollars in small grants to artists with AIDS.

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To me, GPS is not a what, it's closer to a how— an attitude, a way of relating to others, perhaps even a tone of voice. It's like the way a home-cooked meal is more than just food. Or the way a spoken word contains a thickness, a weight in the room, that a written word sometimes doesn't have. To know the difference doesn't come from having certain pieces of information, but from witnessing the unpredictable ways it gets entangled into people's lives.

Krist says that this show deals with scale in every sense of the word, and mixed into all those Big Egos are hurricanes of cum—endless acts of giving a bit of yourself to others.

With much love in return,

Anthony