ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

John Giorno

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with John Giorno conducted by Sara Sinclair on October 22, 2014. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center	Session #1
Interviewee: John Giorno	Location: New York, New York
Interviewer: Sara Sinclair	Date: October 22, 2014

Q: Today is October 22 and I'm with John Giorno at his home in Manhattan. So, to begin today, if you could tell me where, and if you like, when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

Giorno: I was born in 1936 and grew up in Brooklyn and Long Island. My parents moved to the suburbs in 1954, which was medieval times. I'm a poet and I've been a poet since I was fourteen years old. So I'm fourteen years old—that might have been 1950. I was born in '36, which is again, medieval times, and I had very good luck with—I just lived this life as a poet. Then I went to Columbia College [New York].

Earlier than that, a teacher in high school in Brooklyn said, "John," it was a group of poets and artists, as were all high schools, who all thought each other great, and the teacher said, "Dylan Thomas is performing at the YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association]. You should go." And she said that to me three or four times. So I thought—well, I was fourteen, so I went and I sat in the third row all by myself. This thing transformed my life. Then I went three successive years—and then we get to Columbia College. I went to Columbia College.

Q: Tell me more about that teacher and that night watching Dylan Thomas. Do you remember anything about that night and how you felt sitting there?

Giorno: I often think it was one of those—in life you have these profound moments by chance. It was just for saying this, and so I did this and by myself, and it was *Under Milk Wood* [1954] and it was him in the middle and three other—six other, three on either side—great actors. I don't remember their names. It was overwhelming because I was a poet and of course if you can think of all those things. I didn't know what I was thinking, but the performance skills of Dylan Thomas. I was just this guy that didn't know that fifty years later I'd be—that's using all that same kind of energy and the idea that this is poetry. I loved all—I loved T. S. Eliot and there was no problem with anything, but this was—so that was that year. I was overwhelmed.

And then the next year, he came again one year later to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and so I took my girlfriend and we sat in the sixth—I was sitting in the third row and when Dylan Thomas, he really performed in this great fashion, but spit came out of his mouth and once—the spit flew—this was a blessing. This roly-poly drunk—he was an alcoholic—he was this roly-poly drunk man. The next year I brought my girlfriend and we sat six seats back and then a third year. And I think on the third year or the second year, I was—these profound moments like we were talking with our friends, other friends from the High School of Performing Arts, and then I had to take a piss and I had to run to the bathroom, and it was late and they had blinking lights and I ran down, I pulled open the bathroom door and bam, into Dylan Thomas. Our faces were this close. You can't even think of anything. I just froze. And it goes on and on.

So my first year in Columbia—

Q: Let me ask you something else. Did you feel like your experience was different in the three successive years? You were already calling yourself a poet and feeling like a poet and writing poetry, so your experience going the second year and the third year, was it different having been doing more writing yourself?

Giorno: No, I think I was too young. Who knows. Maybe I worked with the sound of it, but I had no idea about—I was just amazed that a poet could do this. It was a little bit like going to see opera, which I do with my family, singers, but it was poetry. Maybe I was just profoundly affected.

And then of course, during those years, I think I bought the album *Under Milk Wood*, which I played incessantly on my phonograph. My first year at Columbia—he was dead by then—*Under Milk Wood* was on Broadway in a quasi-Broadway—well-intentioned, but suddenly it looked like *Oklahoma!* Not even *Oklahoma! Oklahoma!* was great. And that just ended—my life ended with Dylan Thomas. I never thought about him again.

Then I'm in Columbia and it's still even earlier. The Beats haven't appeared yet, 1954. So that's the very beginning.

Q: Do you have any of the writing that you did as a teenager?

Giorno: Probably. In all of the schools I went to, the junior highs and high schools, I was poetry

editor of *The Madison Review* and at Columbia I was poetry editor of *The Columbia Review*. That was just the underground. I have all of those issues—all of those things in my archive, which has been archived—that part of it's done. It's archived already. So yes, I have—it's really terrible, I know.

Q: When's the last time you looked at it?

Giorno: Not for a few decades. I look at the answers. There's a whole project for the last three years of cataloguing my archive, and so all of the boxes have been brought in and opened. I don't even look at them, but occasionally I do stumble upon things. The covers, I always like to see. They were aspirational.

Q: Right. How were they aspirational?

Giorno: With any project, all of my work, all of the countless things I've done. When you do something. I'm a poet. I'm not a designer, but I work very closely with countless designers and covers are always the aspiration of the work, but it's not the work. The work is inside the book or inside the whatever.

Q: Sure. I read in another interview that you gave that there was a period of disillusionment when you were at Columbia. That you were editing, as you say, the *Review* and that there was a period where you felt—you stopped writing for a year and a half?

Giorno: That was, I think my senior year or—now when did that happen? At the beginning of my senior year. I graduated in ’58 so it might have been in ’57. I think those were the last poems, at the end of that, were poems from the last issue that I was editor, those were published. But at the same time, I was reading Frank O’Hara in that last year, ’58, ’57. I’m not sure what it was called, “Anthology of American Poetry”? I don’t even remember, but his poem “Hôtel Transylvanie” [1959] had a profound effect on me. The language used. A different kind of a bright feeling of what Dylan Thomas did about performance and that stuck with me, but I was very young and I had a lot of those kind of profound—the reason I didn’t like—I didn’t really like Columbia College. Everybody there wanted to become a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer and they wanted to move out to the suburbs and my parents had moved out to the suburbs and I knew how deadly and boring it is. It’s heavenly beautiful, it’s luxurious, but it’s deadly. I knew that, so I’m like, “Are you nuts? You want to become a doctor and make a lot of money to move to the suburbs? Or a lawyer or an engineer?”

So, like in all colleges, I gravitated to a small little group of people who drank in the West End and had the great teachers. All of the great teachers: Lionel Trilling, Mark Van Doren, Eric Bentley, and on and on. Those had a profound effect on me.

Q: So how did you discover the downtown art scene? You met Andy Warhol in 1962. How did that world open up to you?

Giorno: ’56 for sure, more like ’56, –7 and –8, I was from New York so I always was drinking

downtown. San Remo [Café] in high school was replaced—I was gay. I'm gay. I am gay and was gay in high school. I hadn't actually made it with anybody, but I often went in the latter years—I guess in my senior year I went to San Remo. Not to meet anybody—to pick up somebody yes, but that was like Gore Vidal and more like—maybe not the last year of high school, but the first year of college, Jack Kerouac drank a lot—more like the Kettle of Fish across—because he didn't like—I think he was gay, but he came occasionally to the San Remo, but if you went over there—if he was in New York, that's where he was drinking.

The last few years at Columbia, that last few years, me and my girlfriend, we'd get drunk every weekend. I liked to go to the White Horse Tavern. This is in '58, –7 and –8, because Dylan Thomas was there. You'd get to see this fat, drunk old man, the back of his sweaty head, sitting at a table. This to me was another blessing. It really exists as a fat, sweaty head—bald head.

Then we went to various other bars and one of them was the Cedar [Tavern] bar in '57 and '58 and I—so there were those abstract paintings and I didn't ever like them. My girlfriend was really beautiful and we understood that these were the painters, but they weren't so famous. This is '57, they were sort of what the cutting edge of art was. So we used to go there once a week, Friday or Saturday, drunk, it was one o'clock in the morning and they would be packed. And I would say to Alice [Dignan] as we walked in the door, I'd say, "Where are they?" Because I never—they didn't interest me. She would say, "They're over there." So I would go over there and I would push through the bar and I would order two vodkas or two beers, whatever we were drinking, and these guys—and she was beautiful so—and they were straight. These fat old men. And they would say, "Alice, hi!" And she would talk to [Mark] Rothko or [Willem] de Kooning

or [Jackson] Pollock, whoever it was, and she knew enough only to talk for a couple of minutes, but we went there often and they recognized her and I, on occasion, tried—I'm not sure who. Rothko or Pollock, or even de Kooning, they were just interested in the myopic worlds of their paintings and that wasn't anything I was interested in and they wanted to—even though I was a poet and maybe I was too handsome or something. The only one person I could talk to was Al Held. You know the painter?

Q: Mm-hm.

Giorno: Because he was a lot younger than they were and he was real young and good-looking—not good-looking, he was very—every time I had somebody to talk to. But that was just that moment after I graduated Columbia. I never went back to the Cedar bar again. Then it ended and the new Cedar bar was not so—

In that last year of '58 the word "Bob Rauschenberg" comes up. Alice said—the taxi kept going down to another bar, whatever it was, and she says, "John, these artists live over there on the Lower East Side, Coenties Slip," and she said, "Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper [Johns], as we know it, and Ellsworth [Kelly] and whatever. So those words came into my head, then at some point they—so that's that.

Q: Do you remember the first time you met Bob?

Giorno: I'm not sure. It's either '61 or '62 because then all of a sudden I have a bunch of friends in the downtown art world starting—

Q: Right. So you said initially you felt that the artists weren't really interested in you. They were maybe interested in your beautiful girlfriend. So when did that change? When did you start to have a dialogue—

Giorno: When I got rid of the abstract painters [laughs]. It was generational. It's interesting how I was sort of irritated with those, because they were so self-centered and drunk—but that was good—but not interested in anything, but on the other hand they had profound relationships. They were all talking about their concept—as we know from art history.

So when that ended I started having new friends here and I started going to Judson Dance Theater in 1961 and all of those things. The gallery openings and that's when I started to meet everybody. It was a tiny scene. Skip two years later to '63. I had a friend, Wynn Chamberlain, who lived on the top floor of this building. We are on the third floor and he was on the fifth floor and he gave me a party in 1963, December 4, 1963. I'd been on the scene for two years then so I knew everybody, and he gave me a birthday party and there were eighty people there and those eighty people didn't come for my birthday party, they just came because they wanted to be together. And this was typical of the very early sixties.

So there were all the Pop artists. Andy had shot *Sleep* in the summer of ’63 and this is December, and I’m a poet so I was already published in *C Magazine*, *St. Mark’s Place* [Poetry Project], *World* and all of those things. But who was there? Like the seven Pop artists and their wives and girlfriends, and then John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, and then the second generation of New York School of poets and well, all the other artists, Yvonne Rainer and Jonas Mekas and just all that other world. George Sugarman—just endless other artists, that whole other world, and Bob. Bob came at one point with Steve [Paxton], because he had broken up the year before with Jasper, and he stayed for a half hour and left, and then Jasper came—Jasper! And it was—if they had come together it would have been quite horrible because it was still raw. And Barbara Rose, because Barbara Rose liked talking to Andy Warhol and Frank [Stella] sort of liked Andy and it was before the politics solidified and nobody went anywhere, but it was my birthday party and nobody cared or knew who John Giorno was. It didn’t matter, this young poet, but it was the spirit of it. So that was in ’63.

So before, in ’62 I met Bob and I went to the parachute dance and Judson Dance—I went every week to the Judson Dance Theater. [Note: Referring to Rauschenberg’s *Pelican*, 1963.]

Q: A couple of questions. You said that the Abstract Expressionists were unfriendly and were self-absorbed. Do you think that there was a difference with the Pop artists? Clearly you connected with them more, but do you think that represented a larger, broader difference in their inner constitutions or their openness to engaging with outsiders?

Giorno: It was just completely generational and generational in terms of like tectonic plates

making an important move. It was just a different mind, different—they were all brilliant, the abstract painters, and they were alcoholic, and that's that. They might have smoked a joint on occasion, whereas all the Pop artists were on speed, happily, and smoked—and took other drugs occasionally. And even though Bob—and Bob was not that generation really, he was this side—he was in our generation. It was just an openness.

That's what attracted me to Bob maybe more than any of them, or Bob and some of the other artists, was their openness of concept. Anything that came to mind was workable possibly and if it was a good idea, they did it or continued doing it or got rid of it. And to me, that was the most important lesson that I learned in my life because poets don't do that. I was a poet and I was stuck in this wretched poetry and there you have—at the same period from more or less '61 on. Frank O'Hara was a friend and John Ashbery when he returned and all of those and they only liked you if you were like them. I knew what they did, this narrow concept of modernism, and they liked me because I was young and they considered me part of the second generation school of poets. I'm in that anthology—I shouldn't be, but I am. But they haven't changed from then 'til today, fifty years later. That wasn't a problem. Allen [Ginsberg] and the Beats I knew, but I'm not a Beat poet and Allen really only liked you if you wrote like him. You know, you were a boy and you wrote like him. I adored Allen for what he had accomplished, "Howl" [1955] and the whole use of language. I wasn't a Beat poet, but there in this world of artists, I could just see—why can't I do what they do, but in poetry? You just do anything that comes to mind and if it works, you follow it into development. So that's the big lesson I learned most from Bob and from all the other artists.

Q: I read that you once articulated something similar to what you just suggested at, which is that you think the world of poetry was seventy-five years behind the world of visual arts. Did you ever talk to other poets about that? Did you ever try to have a dialogue with other poets about—

Giorno: Yes, because I've spent my life with poets. Everybody thinks that too, but they think they're the ones who brought it up to date. But I even think, not so. The Beat poets, or the heritage of the Beat poets, is still nineteenth century lyrical poetry, and the transformation in a funny way began with Bob and me, as synchronously, the use of technology. Words have changed in our culture, in our minds—the mind of the culture, from the technology; Internet and texting and everything. Most poets today don't get it, or very few. Like everything, people are working with this.

The other thing that follows through my entire life, is that everybody always says poetry is dead, whether it's because it's boring—the New York School, or before that, or [John] Berryman, or whoever the great poets are, and poetry's dead. Many say poetry is dead today because nobody reads poems, nobody buys books, but poetry is like human nature. You can't annihilate the human race. If you try to kill every person in the world, you couldn't. And poetry arises in everybody's mind or heart, whoever are poets, and they get bored every day. So to say that about poetry is sort of like not understanding the nature of human nature. But this is fundamental to poetry. Now I think poetry, in a sense, is in great flux, which is great, because when something is in flux, it's not dead. It's the opposite. It's struggling to be reborn, struggling with birth.

Q: How do you think it's in flux today?

Giorno: I think it's more like at the beginning—the way technology has changed very young people's minds. Even those things they say about one- and two-year-olds, they shouldn't watch the iPad screen more than one hour a day. And the effects of that, after even the first generation, will profoundly affect the way we read and think, which is not a negative because the mind is there. The mind is working and developing as people become educated to it, so it's just a profound change in cultural perception or language.

Q: Were you—you started to work with technology yourself, sharing poetry through different sound technologies. Was that something that you were self-conscious about? Were you thinking about how this use of technology would change the way people received it?

Giorno: I got introduced to that very formally because my life sort of changed. William Burroughs and Brion Gysin in November, Thanksgiving of '64 and they became best friends by January—or I met them in early January and then there were all these parties. So they became the center of my life. The whole visit—they were here for nine months—was sort of a heroic gesture. They came, William to make a book deal, and for the two of them, they wrote a book together called *The Third Mind*, which they started in January and worked through September 1, every workday. So they were accomplishing that and Brion was here to sell the Dream Machine, and William was here to do endless other art deals or art.

But one of the things they came with was poetry sonore, sound poetry, which William worked with the cut-up. William was fascinated with technology, but he was like your great-grandfather. He even held the telephone like a foot from his ear. And the cut-up series entered the possibilities of it all and Brion Gysin was one of the founding members of Poésie sonore in Paris. His first piece was ’58, and they were Bernard Heidsieck, François Dufrêne, Brion, and Henri Chopin. Those four.

So he came in and they brought all these things, these LP records and tapes. Brion worked with BBC in London in that famous studio and so this was formally introduced to me, John Giorno, as a young poet. This concept. Then Brion would play these records in the Hotel Chelsea [New York] on this little phonograph. People who came to me, everybody was stoned, and it was a scene. Then at one point Brion said to me, “In April, we should do a collaboration.” I was shocked. I’m this kid and I’m a poet and I’m struggling with what I’m doing with these found images. I said, “Well, great.” I had just finished a poem called “Subway Poem,” and Brion says, “Why don’t we do this poem?” So we did a collaboration. His voice, a subway sound. By August he said, “Send it to Bernard Heidsieck in Paris,” which I did, and then I got back a letter. Everything takes two weeks or three weeks, you send a letter, and then they would write back. He was going to include it in the biennale Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris in October of ’65. I was thrilled. So that happened and then they left. And I just kept doing it. Then I took it—at this point I knew a bunch of musicians, like Philip Glass was at Juilliard [School, New York], at Columbia, when I was there. He wasn’t a close friend until the early sixties, but Steve Reich at the time, Max Neuhaus was there, and I went to their performances and I was in a couple of their performances, and I saw what they did with loops. You take two, you paste them with Scotch

tape and you do this thing, you have a loop, you have a repetition. And so for that year, I did these sound compositions knowing—getting the idea with Brion with these various poems of mine. So I kept doing that.

But it was only a year and then I went to Morocco and then I came back from Morocco and then I—then I see Bob—I hadn't met Bob. He wasn't a friend. Maybe he knew me or he didn't know me, but I was just a kid. But I met Bob in September of '66 and started working with E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] and that's when I got to know him really well. And that was the next step because I came back and I'm working and I'm working, I have a year or so fiddling around with sound so I knew more what I was doing, and then when I connected with E.A.T. to a whole bunch of things that sort of transformed my life into something else.

Q: Tell me more about that time. About meeting Bob and his work on Experiments in Art and Technology and the influence that that had on you.

Giorno: I had just arrived back from Morocco, moved into this loft, so it's September of '66. Two of my good friends were Jill Johnston and Lucinda Childs. They were a couple. They were lovers. We saw each other walking. They used to come here often to visit. Lucinda was in 9 Evenings[: Theatre & Engineering] and they were lovers, so they were saying they were so behind schedule and endlessly asking for volunteers and, "You should do it, John," and I said, "Okay, maybe." Then I didn't do anything and I saw them again and they said, "They're really looking for volunteers," and I said, "Okay, I'll go."

And I went one afternoon and I didn't do much and they said come back tomorrow, but Steve Paxton I knew from Judson Dance Theater. I knew everyone there. All the people were working on it. Bob—I knew all of them. So that's what started it. Then I went back and worked on a number of pieces. I was working on Bob's piece as the cameraman—the video piece?

Q: Mm-hm.

Giorno: I was the one that took the headshot of him. That was easy because I didn't have to move the camera or I zoomed slightly, I think. Just being introduced to the concept of artists working with technology—I was a poet, but I had sort of a feeling for it. One of the important things that happened was that in the process of 9 Evenings there were these endless press conferences or parties and one time Bob said to me, "Do you see that—" I got introduced to this short man. Short, balding—he was only thirty-two, but he was short and fat and balding, and Bob looked at me and said, "This is John Giorno." Bob said to me, "You should get to know that guy. He's doing something very important." I said, "Oh yeah, I will." So then two days later he said, "Have you talked to that guy over there?" I said, "Oh no. I haven't gotten around to it." Then two days after that, a little stronger, "Have you talked to that guy over there?" And I said, "No." Then Bob said, "He's doing very important things with sound. You'll be very interested." Then the fourth day, he screamed, "Go over and talk to him!" So I went over and it was [Robert] Bob Moog. Bob Moog, M-O-O-G, who had just invented the Moog synthesizer, and we became friends.

It was so lucky. This was ’66. Bob Moog has just invented the Moog synthesizer and he is trying to sell it and almost nobody knows that he has it. I think in the sixties maybe two or three rock bands were experimenting with it and had never put it on a record. Then, in ’67, they say a hundred rock bands had it and it was on half a dozen albums, and in ’68 every single rock band in the world had a Moog synthesizer and almost every album that was released used a Moog synthesizer.

So this was ’66 and I got to know him and then early January of ’67 I went, for the first time, up to Trumansburg, New York, where he had his studio, where he manufactured. Two store fronts and a one-story, brick nineteenth century building where he assembled these things as fast as he could. We worked on making sound compositions, taking it another step from what I had been doing before—that was all of these many track tape-recorders—and using it—something that didn’t really exist—using the voice as a—the synthesizer as a vocoder; changing the oscillations of the pitch and making layers. I had been doing layers, different tracks of sound, slightly off sync with different frequencies, which was the development of these sound compositions. And then with Bob Moog, I did one three times, January, maybe one in April, and maybe at the end of the year in January. I don’t think we did a fourth time—my life changed and then he went off onto another—then—Bob Moog.

So that was one little error that had enormous effect on the next ten years of my life. It was just being able to take sound composition, not being musically trained, but working with great engineers from then on. Shortly after Bob Moog I met Bob Bielecki, Robert Bielecki, who I work with now, fifty years later. He’s my engineer. We work on endless projects all the time

now. We're just finishing something for the National Museum [of Art, Architecture and Design] in Oslo, another version of *Dial-A-Poem* [1968–]. They get shipped the day after tomorrow and I go over in a couple of weeks.

Q: Oh fun. Let's talk more about—you said you met Bob in September of '66?

Giorno: Yeah, mid—whenever they were preparing for 9 Evenings.

Q: Okay, so he was working on that and in that year I think he also—he performed *Linoleum* [1966] and *Pelican* at the NOW Festival in [Washington] D.C.

Giorno: Yeah.

Q: Do you remember—do you have memories of him working on those pieces or memories of those pieces at all?

Giorno: What's the date on those? The months?

Q: That was in April of '66 and they were performed in D.C.

Giorno: I think I went to one thing, but I think I went to something in Connecticut or did he do it again? Where did I see *Pelican*? Did he only do it in D.C.? Because I saw it. Then I must have gone, not with him. I got in a car and got taken down there.

Q: Okay. What was that like?

Giorno: That was, like everything, you were just exhilarated that somebody would do this. Not only this, but somebody who in your mind was a great artist. That was the encouragement one got from Bob in particular. Anything that came around, you could work with. And you could do anything with it. *Pelican*, Bob does it so successfully, but that was the last piece, other than 9 Evenings. Bob Rauschenberg was very smart and he knew you don't do what's too difficult or fails. And performance is so complicated. I learned the same lesson. I had endless installations and then I gave all of those up in the eighties, all music up, just because it's based on performance and it's based on the breath in your body as a performer, at least in my—in most cases. The essence comes from within, no matter what you do with it in performances, it's breath. Not having a dance company or not with musicians or not with any accompaniment is the greatest liberation. For the last twenty-five or more years, I just perform and have gotten rid of all technology, other than the ones that are inherent in it. So maybe I'm misreading or saying something, but Bob didn't continue with that performance because it's so difficult, it's a distraction.

Q: That's interesting.

Giorno: Bob—the other great lesson is that you follow your intuition and hope that your intuition this time is pure. How it arises in your mind, or your heart-mind, is so—

Q: That's really interesting. So you think that he was really—he was aware of what the outer limits were of what he could pull off and that he consciously avoided doing anything beyond that because he wanted to pull it off and he was aware of the possibility of failure?

Giorno: Not failure, just the time consumption of it. We have a limited focus of energies and when you do—like me, when you do a million things, you can't do every single thing. But it wasn't—it was so hugely successful, *Pelican*, then it was followed by 9 Evenings which was a lot of problems. But problems because it was the early use of technology and when you start doing that, it's all sort of the hardware of the past mixed with software now. So each person had problems with their pieces. So maybe after he did that performance himself in '66 at the [69th Regiment] Armory [New York], between that and *Pelican* he was taking a breather. I'm not making this up, right? Because then he goes deeper into technology with *Revolver* [1967], more or less the months—or the period after, he started working on that, which was again, a problem because it's working with old hardware from the past and this big technology. The hardware was so complicated. It should be software, but software was not invented in those years, so the things that propelled those giant revolvers caused endless problems, I think, probably still do. And I mean it kindly.

Robert Rauschenberg
Revolver II, 1967
Silkscreen ink on five rotating Plexiglas discs in metal base with electric motors and control box
78 1/4 x 77 x 24 1/2 inches (198.8 x 195.6 x 62.2 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

I don't think about Bob in that sense, other than talking to you now, and after that, he just steps back into the world in which he flourishes with his painting and sculpture and the way he does it, and then doesn't get blocked from these kind of technologies. Me too. I've stepped back many times in my life. Certain technologies I know are just too complicated and all the time—and I'm not good at it. Maybe that's another lesson; don't do what you're not good at.

Q: Yes, or collaborate with people who are good at things you're not good at.

Giorno: That I learned, yes [laughs].

Q: When you think back on E.A.T., what do you think worked? Are there specific things that you think really worked and did push the use of art in technology forward?

Giorno: Well the whole thing. The concept that E.A.T. existed. It was this concept that was born

and it became apparent in everyone's mind in the world, and to all of it, was the great accomplishment. I think all the pieces were really good. Everyone was great. Bob, Lucinda, every single person, but they were informed—they were—they approached it as formed artists, grown-up artists. They didn't grow up with it as kids. That's the generational change; the kids that grew up with it then became—and not me because I'm sort of six or eight or ten years younger than them, I'm not the new generation. I was able to—with my fingertips—to hold on and get swept along with it and be able to use it successfully, from 1965 to maybe the early seventies, or with the sound compositions through 1980. That's when I completely gave up, in 1980, not to ever do anything again with technology, other than perform—and with a band, but a band is not technology.

So, not to be unkind, but those artists didn't grow up with technology, so each of their pieces was brilliant in its own way. It's all great in the context of each, but the big accomplishment of 9 Evenings was Bob and [Johan Wilhelm] Billy [Klüver]'s concept of connecting this thing, or maybe they just saw that that's what kids were doing. But the kids were fourteen years old—twelve and fourteen, and not ready for the 9 Evenings of art and technology. So that's what happened. They were spawning something they were not—to change the world now. Change the world over the next fifty years to now, fifty years later.

Q: So you met Bob and you were volunteering at E.A.T. and then you became involved with Bob?

Giorno: Yes, we were lovers for a while.

Q: So what can you tell me about getting involved with Bob?

Giorno: He was a great lover and I think I probably was much—he was much more important to me than I was for him. I was sort of his moment in—it was a transition in Bob's life, from Jasper to Steve [Paxton] and somehow that was—ended, and I was there. For me he was this great artist and this enormous influence. For me, I was sort of the struggling poet who was trying to invent what poetry—reinvent, so I wasn't thinking myself very important. He was a great lover, sexually and his mind. I think the best thing—the most important thing I got from Bob Rauschenberg was just being with his mind. We're talking about all that happened with the technology and this and that, and we're lovers so you're naked with somebody. I've had experience with others, like William Burroughs—when you spend a lot of time with a great person's mind, somehow it has a profound influence on yours. One sort of obvious cliché is that it has a radiation. I think somehow this mind that produces great works has a blessing effect. It's a cliché word, but it has this blessing effect on you. And then the other influence was just seeing what he did. Like why he would pick this glass rather than that or the other way around—they're the same things, but somehow you understood why he made that decision. That's some kind of a nonverbal teaching and what I learned most—the greatest was on that level as well as everything else.

Q: Was that something tangible, this idea? Was it something you can describe? Why he would pick that glass instead of this?

Giorno: That was with everybody. Andy Warhol, why he would pick this and not that. It's fascinated me all of my life. William Burroughs, why he would pick something or not. These are all people on a daily basis dealing with objects or thoughts or William, more like ideas or words—and I think that's teaching, even though it's nonverbal and you can't explain it. It has to do with being able to use deep and—this is not even a word—intuition, but deeply, somehow in a way that you see the music. It comes from another part of the mind maybe. I'm a Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist for countless years. Tibetans often relax their mind and then to see an idea with that state of mind, rather than continuing a discursive thought, they let the mind rest for two seconds or ten seconds. Sometimes that's maybe what they do. They don't know they're meditating, Andy or Bob, everyone, and what comes up is sort of wisdom and that's what becomes an image or a choice or work.

Q: A couple of questions. With what you were just describing, you've spent a lot of time with many incredible artists and incredible minds. So two questions about that. One, you've described feeling like maybe you were the beneficiary of some kind of radiation of being around Bob's mind.

Giorno: It's almost a cliché. That's too strong. It's more like being in a subtle space with that energy maybe. That's even strong. Those words are strong.

Q: But I think I understand what you're suggesting at. What was Bob's mind like?

Giorno: It was very active and very rich and very expressive. What he did in his art he did in daily life. He drank a lot and smoked a lot of cigarettes and grass, and so he's always expressing these strong feelings in the work and every day.

Q: You said that you watched this process with Rauschenberg and with Burroughs and with Johns, this wisdom that would arise in each of them. They're different people, so clearly that would be—it would have a different expression.

Giorno: It's why it's some subtle thing that's general to sort of great people, I think. It's probably common to everybody, in their special state of mind in how they affect their partner or the person who relates to them, maybe. Because it's not only these three guys in the world, these six, eight, ten guys in the world. It's not about being special. But maybe their genius has a certain quality. Well, that's what I meant. Maybe their genius has a certain quality. Like in great Lamas, great Tibetan Lamas that have the ability to give blessings or the power of their mind is slightly transformative or helps in some way, some subtle fashion. More like a little bit like that.

Q: So thinking about yourself, you said that you were a young poet and you met Bob and you had great respect and admiration for him. When you look back on that period of your life, what effect do you ascribe to his influence on you?

Giorno: In my work, there are just endless threads that began sort of some with Bob and went on—some dwindled and vanished and were absorbed. You said earlier that I had stopped writing

poetry for a year and a half. That was true and it was more like—after Columbia, come to think of it. It was ’59 into early ’60. Then from early ’60, ’61, I started going to all these shows and seeing people use the found image. So by ’61 I understood it in a way. I had gone to Columbia and I had studied art and I knew [Marcel] Duchamp and Dada and all of it, and the Italians and the Russians and all of it, but somehow that was not an influence in my life. It was like dead, learned history that I knew about. But it was seeing all of the—not anyone in particular. Seeing [James] Jim Rosenquist or George Segal or anyone, just seeing what they did repetitively, shows that opened. Frank Stella with those early lines. Just seeing it on a daily basis, at some point I said to myself, about the found image—with Bob later—if they can do this for art, why can’t I do it for poetry? Everybody was young. It wasn’t that they were older guys. They were just a few years older than me and that was the impetus for the rest of my life. If they can do it, just hold your nose and jump.

So I started using the found image in late ’61 very carefully. It took me weeks and months just to pick one image. I hadn’t met Andy. I had shook Andy’s hand, but he was not a friend yet. These were published in *C Magazine*, of Ted Berrigan and the Lower East Side, those young poets were thrilled with my found poetry, and it was arising freshly from the influence to now, even though I knew it came from Dada and all of that.

So for years, ’62, –3, –4, –5, –6, I was working with endless kinds of use of found image. At some point before that, more like ’65 or early ’65, I started making collages. Collages always were a real problem for me. It’s too easy. Like today, it’s too easy to make visual, pasty collage. So I chose images and I very carefully—and I made line breaks and I then put them in a lineal

order, making—weaving a tapestry of images so each related to each other, but each being a thread that got then woven. This is what I was doing when I really met Bob in ’66. In those months later, I just saw what he used in paintings, the kind of image he used and why, and why he didn’t do this and why he didn’t use political images. I think because of William Burroughs, I became overly political. So political images, those kind of really strong political statements were really important to me. Because with Andy—which were my years before William Burroughs—political images were off the radar. You couldn’t use political images and then Burroughs, and then with Bob it was off the radar too and all for the wrong reasons, but that’s not the point. But I was just working with it, so my time with Bob, the use of very carefully chosen thin collage evolved greatly.

Q: You said the first time you tried to work with found images, it took you weeks to pick that first one. Can you talk me through that process? Do you remember the first effort to do that?

Giorno: I thought about it for months and then I actually picked something—I’m not sure the exact words—but it was in the *New York Times* and it had something to do with almost a *National Geographic* kind of subject matter and I just—what the found images then became for me was each of these stupid words, the three of them together, is like a metaphor for something else that’s inexplicable. It’s not any kind of traditional saying this is something else. It was just—they’re so pure, these images, that somehow they work. And this was, that first one was—*National Geographic*—it was really strong. So I did my first line breaks on a typewriter and just stayed with it for a month or something. Then something curious happened, this is amazing. [Frederick] Fred Herko—of the Judson Dance Theater and Andy Warhol’s *Haircut* [1963],

Freddie Herko—died. And I made my second found poem from the obituary in the *Village Voice* because that—I have this microphone on, but do you see that paper on the corner there?

Q: Mm-hm.

Giorno: That's the poem. And on Sunday I perform it. On Sunday, this coming—October 26 at Judson [Memorial] Church is the fiftieth anniversary of Fred Herko's suicide.

Q: Oh wow.

Giorno: So we have a big program on it. It's at NYU [New York University] and Emily Harvey Gallery and this and that, and then I've written a piece of being with Andy when Fred dies. It's a deeply moving piece. They want me to open the program at four o'clock on Sunday at Judson, reading that found poem that I wrote from—the second found poem—and then my memoir piece about Andy.

Then I just went on very, very carefully that year to these things and then never again did I do something that was related to *National Geographic* or somebody's suicide. You just chose these images sort of the way—not only Andy, but the way—you went to every artist's studio. The way you saw works and processes, how they chose images.

Q: How did people respond to that work?

Giorno: Well everyone loves it because they were all kids on the Lower East Side. So the poets—these artists who were older than me—whoever read it. I'm not sure because everybody, they were mimeograph magazines, *World* and *C Magazine* and others, and editors were very good at giving them out free. So this tiny art world that included everybody, everybody got given one. So I was this sort of a minor little star and they loved my found poetry because they related to it. They didn't have an axe to grind. Frank O'Hara, I'm sure didn't—it was not poetry for Frank O'Hara. He had a thing about, you can't do that. You can't take found images. It's just, it's not poetry. And Allen Ginsberg, the same thing. You can take—with Allen or the Beat poets, somebody can give you an idea like Jack can give William *Naked Lunch* as a title, but somehow that's not a found title. William always said he used lots of things in his work, in cut-ups, but it was—so the Beats didn't approve of it. So the Beats didn't like me and the New York School of poets, but there's another world of young poets who just adore me. Young poets in those generations and of course, the big support would have been anybody in the art world because it was just cool. I was trying.

So that's why, again, it was supportive. The art world was supportive. Somebody liked it.

Q: Do you think that—I don't know if this is a good question or not—because you were a poet who was spending so much time with visual artists, do you think that the impact of different forms of art is the same or do you think that poetry has a different—do you have a different aim as a poet than Bob did or Andy did, as a painter?

Giorno: I think so, because those guys just focused on the area that they worked on. My thing sort of then broadened in the succeeding fifty years because painting is one of the things that—I'm a painter. I have endless shows. You know the November Independent [Projects]? Max Wigram in London is my gallery, so the whole booth is my paintings, these black-and-white silkscreen paintings. Endlessly. And I have a new series of paintings that's in Miami Basel [Art Basel Miami], what is that? December. So this is an important part of my life for the last twenty years.

So the point of that and why I do this is, what I do is I work with words and so at this crux moment in 1965 and –6 when I become a poet and I start performing and I get connected to technology, and then technology takes me down a path because then, by '68, I get the idea for *Dial-A-Poem* and by '69 and then into the records and then I do fifty records. All of it seemed sort of commonplace, but I was—it was early years and I was sort of discovering the technology of LP records and how you could use them and how you made records and how much you could put on it and what you could do with it, and album covers, and it all became a venue, but a complete venue, everything in it. Just the LPs into CDs and that took a whole line in my life for over—only thirty or forty years.

At the same time, another coming out of whatever went on until then, was a performer. Besides technology, I got into technology making sound compositions, but then my voice took me out of it happily and into being a performer. Then it's another fifty years of change—many changes and how, through work, your style changes. I'm quite different now and I think I'm a better

performer, even though I'm seventy-seven years old. In certain circumstances I'm a more powerful performer now than I was when I was a great performer in the eighties—the seventies or eighties.

Anyway, that's another thing completely different from the LP records. Then art, I started doing those silkscreens in '68 also, just silkscreen prints because I saw all these—it's so easy to do a silkscreen. You just do it. So I did. They have all been sort of catalogued now. They'll be in a show coming up. But it's the idea that you can do silkscreens.

So that's another softer part of my life because I did this bunch of silkscreens in the late sixties, a couple shows at the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] at the Kynaston [McShine] *Information* show [1970], but I could never get a gallery. It wasn't my interest. I'm a poet, so my focus was the poetry world. The art world—I don't have to explain the art world. Then I did odd things and something else pressed—we did two editions. The Nova Scotia [College of Art and Design] school of art somewhere in the seventies, I did another stone—on stone. I remembered Bob worked on stone, so it was interesting. Not doing it very well, but I worked on stone, four colors on stone up in Nova Scotia.

And then I didn't do very much until I began in the middle or early eighties with my latest designer, Mark Michaelson, who I've worked with from then. Thirty or forty years? Thirty years. And then with Macintosh, you were able to change designs. Mark was one of the first to discover you could do that and so he did it for me and then I started doing these big silkscreens in '85 or '86, and that began. Again, it was one of these crucial moments. He was one of like five brilliant

ones who saw that you could do this with the Mac and he did it for me for like six months, then he said, "John, it's going to be all over." He was art director of *Newsweek*. The senior art director. He said, "It's going to be all over. I'm doing a guest cover for the *Village Voice* and I'm going to use this type." He did two guest covers. And six months later American Express had—whether they saw Mark's *Village Voice* cover or not, American Express had used that format.

But it works for me, so I just keep—all these years later and I have all these shows because it's about painting. It's about silkscreen. I've just done sort of 40-inch—48-inch watercolors. There will be a show. I'm not sure where, but giant. In the passing of only five years—or eight years—I've done so many watercolors that it becomes something that you learn as well as oil and silkscreen, so it becomes a thing that I've developed, even though I have a remote art history in that I went to Pratt Institute [New York] when I was ten-and-a-half to thirteen-and-a-half and studied drawing and painting and things for those years, but ten-and-a-half to thirteen-and-a-half, and then I completely stopped. When I went to high school I completely stopped art because I then become a poet.

But I think now because I work every day, I've got this memory. In school you only remember the things that are stupid and the teacher tells you. But maybe I did learn. Anyway, these skills that I've developed and show with are another—are still another line, which is painting, sculpture and—painting in its various forms, and drawing. I've had many shows with drawings using the same format dealing with paper and a pencil. All those things that those guys would have thought about, Bob Rauschenberg, in the fifties, but I'm doing it now. It all has to do with—it's a venue for poetry and my words so it's all—I consider it all equal in some way. And

that's how they all got connected. And they all come from that expression that one learned from Bob, of being able to do other things and allowing yourself to be open enough to let it happen. But then it's not a rule. You don't have to do that. You can do one thing, which is also—

Q: So let's go back to '66 and '67, the work that you were doing. You did "Raspberry" and "Pornographic Poem." Can you tell me about that project?

Giorno: There was an LP—that was sort of an early idea. All that we did in those years was listen to phonograph records. We just bought them and played them, bought them and played them. You sat there and you were listening to sound, so why can't these be poetry records? I didn't quite get the idea of what I was doing because this was so early, but this was a venue for poetry, the LP record, because you sat in a chair, more than one person, listening. The pieces I was doing, they were strangely—what year was it? It was more like '65. The fall of '65, October or November, I wrote this pornographic poem. Like porn on the net, but I just happened to have printed words, so printed words. We should do a pornographic poem. So I just took one really stupid pornographic—it was like a page that I broke into—a paragraph that I broke into a page and it was a gay and excessive porno—excessive pornography and then it was published over there in I guess Ted Berrigan's *C Magazine*, which is a very important magazine, and it was really an early use—nobody used pornography in such a blatant way. It was just porn and taking it abstractly the way that Andy would have taken any of those images. And then Random House did the anthology of New York School of poets in '68 and Ron Padgett included it as something that was important. And nobody used pornography. But skip three years, there was *Screw*—but by '69 or '70, all those pornographic newspapers like *Screw* were on the newsstand with those

covers that everybody could look at, and pornography had changed. The world had changed radically and I stopped doing it shortly after. I used this pornography and I didn't then do another one until I get to those years—not those ones that were on the record. Not "Chromosome." Those were Bob's years. "Chromosome" and "Raspberry." I think the batches of poems after that, I started using pornographic images as one thread, one lineal thread that I wove in the poem, and did that for a number of years until I—I'd always take it another step. I could do it better than I did the last time, then I did it a third time, and then more or less that's it. You did it. And then go on for something else that popped up in one of those moments at work. Then I stopped doing all of that, all of those kind of found poems in 1979 or '80.

Q: Where did you record *Raspberry*?

Giorno: Here.

Q: Here?

Giorno: Yes. We still have the tape. I went out with my archivist, Marcia Bassett—two days, two tape recorders. One of them was there. Then I made a bad decision because that came out in '67. I should have put the Moog tapes on, but I decided that I wanted to put the tapes on that I did that past year because that was what I did for a year, so that's why I put "Chromosome" and all those sort of poems I wrote when Bob and I were together. But I had made the step to Moog and so I should have put one on. I make all kinds of mistakes because I'm thick-headed. And those have

never been released, the Moog tapes. They've got it on cassettes in Germany. They should have been released in their day. What was the question?

Q: Do you remember recording—

Giorno: I think I got an idea of having different people record it because I did something before that, or I had other people record and I realized that the personal quality of the person, the way that they pronounced words was so personal, with feeling, that they became something else. Two people reading the same thing became two plays. So I got the idea that I should just ask people to do it and I asked—I don't remember now, eight or nine or eleven people to do it. Like Yvonne Rainer. She came here. This is where she did it. Gave a perfect, cool reading. Brilliant. And then [Patricia] Patty Oldenburg [Mucha, née Muschinski], who was the wife of Claes Oldenburg, who was very over-the-top, you would think she would give a great performance, she gave a very nervous performance. I thought this is great! And then Brice Marden, who is quite straight, was really cool with it, and Brice's wife Helen [Marden] read it also, was really cool. Then Timothy Leary's wife, Nena von Schlebrügge. Nena, who is now married all these many years, married to [Robert] Bob Thurman, Nena von Schlebrügge or something, a great Danish woman, she read it with the great aplomb of a Danish aristocrat. So everybody brought this thing.

Then I think at some point, it was quite early in the process, Yvonne Rainer was doing a piece at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], and I had done four or five of them already, and she said, "John, I'd like to use three of them," and I hadn't done Bob yet. I kept nagging—not nagging, like we were all busy. Then on a funny day, it was sort of a cloudy day like now and it rained and

we all had enormous hangovers from like three days drinking. Maybe it was Sunday or something and we sort of saved the day and it was recovery, and it's, "Bob, you have—" and fucking, "Bob, you haven't done that poem. Today you have to." And it was no problem. He went over to the other room and he read it. But we had been fucking all day and being stoned and with this hangover, so his voice was incredibly sensuous. Just every phrase was honey. And so I was very happy with that. And so it became a piece and it went on one side of the record and the others went on the other side. So that was my first LP record and then I went on to do fifty more albums.

Q: One thing that's really struck me when I've been reading a lot about Bob or talking with people about Bob, is it sounds like he was very—well, he was obviously very social to the extent that he always wanted to have people around him. And so I've wondered about how other artists who were with him found the time to be away to do their own work. Did that just happen naturally or—

Giorno: Yes. It just happened naturally at the time. Two of the many good friends of ours, [Robert] Bob Morris and Yvonne Rainer, they knew Bob well enough that they could just ring the doorbell at 7:30. It wasn't about we have to make a date, next Tuesday at 7:30 can we come by? Or 8:00 or something, and we were drinking. Or on a Saturday afternoon when people generally don't work, people were like that. Trisha Brown. Bob talked to a lot of those people, so he would say, "See you later." It was all sort of really relaxed. I don't flourish in those environments—I did with him because I loved being there. But in my personal life, I'm a poet and a Buddhist, so I don't like a lot of people. To me it's so distracting. I have a lover, Ugo

Rondinone. We are together seventeen years and we have similar lives. We have lots of space. I have three lofts here. He has a church up in Harlem. We have three other houses. You can imagine, he's quite famous so he has endless people demanding things, and me too. So we just like being alone together. Dean & DeLuca and a joint—and joints is it. I guess we're tired. We don't even drink wine at night, and then we drink as much wine et cetera when we go out. But it's the opposite because then when we do go out, for me personally it's like a performance. You go to dinner, but you have to endlessly talk with a lot more energy than I'm doing now because when you're drinking wine, you're emoting in this sort of grandiose—you're talking and making people laugh, and then you do that for six hours and you go home and it's like as much energy as when I perform for three thousand people, which takes a bit of energy. I like doing that, but we like being quiet. I don't understand how a person can be a great writer and then go to dinner parties every night, the next morning wake up with that same discursive mind rattling away in their head. Some people do. It's all a matter of times in your life. I'm sure Bob—that was a difficult part of Bob's life because of the transition into 9—his life was changing after. But maybe when he and Jasper were together in the late fifties, they had a quiet life together in another kind of way, and Bob maybe went on to have a quiet life later on in Captiva and this and that. But not those years. Because like Billy Klüver stopped by every day because they were always working on something, and Olga Klüver and whoever else, and Julie Martin, and this constant flow. That's the best—it's something about being very social, but that's not social. It's a part of all these projects. That one I have in my life, all the people who work on projects, they're a joy to see because it's just the project is progressing or whatever it is, is progressing. So that's all the people and then the friends who were friends, like Deborah Hay and Alex [Hay], they came by to visit, and they were sort of just comforting to Bob, I think, yes.

Q: Why was that a difficult period of Bob's life?

Giorno: It was sort of a transition period from being—see, I don't really know the personal things, but having a stable relationship with Jasper, and having a stable relationship with Steve Paxton, and somehow the turmoil of 9 Evenings changed his life. I don't think anything bad was happening with Steve. There was no reason why he did this thing, fall in love with me. Then it only got worse. 9 Evenings, it was a big project. And then Bob drank a lot in those years and that takes its toll, and then it went on and he had a bunch of boyfriends after me, and then he I guess had a stable relationship with David after that.

But it was—this was still quite early for me, '66. Bob is older, but I'm still—even though I'm not so young, I'm still a kid and I had taken my first thirty-four LSD trips the year before, from March to whatever—from February to September in the Hotel Chelsea with Brion Gysin and then a bunch of LSD in Morocco because it was Owsley's Sunshine acid, somehow I got it free. Bob—I think it was probably the only LSD trip Bob took. That must have been—it was really cold, so it may have been January or February of '67, that period roughly, that I had some and he was curious and he took it. That was extremely strong acid and I don't think we took a whole—he might have wanted to. They were little orange barrel-shaped things. Teeny barrels. And sometimes you broke them in half and that was enough to trip. But I think Bob said he took one and didn't feel it. And it was very, very strong. He never took another pill. This was before *Revolver* and so I'm not sure what he saw or what the influence was, but you certainly on LSD feel the empty nature of mind and you sort of see space as illusion, so it might have given rise to

Revolver. But I think he was thinking about *Revolver* before it, maybe it sort of—where it's like illusions passing like smoke, not in all the hard technology, and it might have affected him in a different way.

It wasn't my best LSD trip because we took it and just as we started getting off, people started visiting. I think we took it in the bedroom and suddenly it was more business than we—and then two or three hours later, Billy came by and so like in any situation, if you're presented with it you just have to act well, as both Bob and I did. Whatever. By the time we get down to the bedroom it's six hours later, when the LSD is sort of diminishing. I never liked LSD when it's really social, where you're doing a lot of discursive talking, because the best of LSD comes intuitively, if you let your mind rest or work with what arises on your mind, rather than gossip. Alex and Debbie Hay came by. Everybody came by. The clock was there, we're looking at the clock waiting to go downstairs to make love because it's so great to make love on LSD.

Q: Did he talk about the experience afterwards?

Giorno: Not so much. He wasn't very articulate about it. I think it was—those drugs are so—I think it probably frightened him. He never wanted to take it again—or it didn't come up because then it went into the summer—there were things that happened, so he didn't come up again. Those are always profound experiences so I'm sure he had a profound experience, particularly with the nature of Bob's work, just the nature of layers of images, a profound influence. Happily, because it would be something lacking if he hadn't had an LSD trip. What would Bob Rauschenberg do if he had taken psilocybin mushrooms in New Mexico? But that's—he had it.

Whatever you get from all of those drugs, he got. I don't know what he did. He might have—he lived a long life and was many times in California, so he might have had those other things. You should find out. I think he was reluctant to talk—when he was alive, he was reluctant to talk about these things. I hope you find out about them. It's quite important just understanding the mind of great artists.

Q: So you describe the period of time that you were with him as a period of transition. What was he transitioning towards?

Giorno: The other side of the transition was the end of our period, which is sort of going into '68. Who is the Hollywood movie star, Shirley MacLaine's brother? Warren Beatty.

Q: Warren Beatty.

Giorno: Bob was just like us. He was this guy who was successful, but he flies out to Los Angeles. I think it was the spring or maybe it was late spring, whatever. Gemini [G.E.L.], again. He had been many times to Gemini. But that was the time he met Warren Beatty and I think that—when he came back he was different in some way. He saw that world of Hollywood on its highest level. I guess maybe all of those movie stars treated him as an equal, as he was. In our world, to me Janis Joplin is somewhere in the Fifth Heaven or something [laughs] and then he got to know Janis Joplin well. Janis Joplin is one of the seminal influences on my performance even though I never met her. Just the way she used her energy was incredibly influential on my performance. I didn't know what she did, but the way I get things intuitively, somehow I went on

to do, has to come in some ways from her. And to me, that she was visiting Bob Rauschenberg, was so—and that world set him in another world of playing that—it's another world. And he maybe—all of those people did lots of cocaine. I have no idea what Bob did, but that was quite different from the world of Steve Paxton. Steve and I are quite similar. We're the same age more or less—I'm two years older, but same age—and that other world that he went to after '68. '68 until the rest of his life.

Q: That kind of segues into another question that I wanted to ask you, which is about—as an artist becomes more known, as they become perhaps more aware of the reach of their influence, do you think that that affects the way that they think about their own job? Does it change the way that they think about their own role as an artist, knowing that they have an audience, knowing that they're having an influence?

Giorno: I think it probably—it has to, on one level or another, occur to every artist whether verbal or not. In relation to Bob, I don't think he—he had his limitations. Dare I come out of Andy—nobody is allowed to talk about being gay. Andy is so gay, but it's not allowed to enter—it's sublime. It doesn't enter the painting in any way other than camp, which is invisible, or in the movies, he was reluctant to do anything, other than odd things. Then you get to William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, a seminal influence on me. Hell, I'm a poet. Then you go back to Bob and Jasper and all those guys, where nobody would ever dream of putting a sexual—Jasper, not; but Bob, he could have done something. But I didn't let that be an issue. It's not my problem. I was so admirational that they could do it. But it was quite retrograde.

And when I left the art world again, which was leaving for India and becoming a Buddhist and then continuing my life with William here—William lived here for all those years. It was political again and all those things that I started with. But there was that blip between Bob and Jasper until that all ended, you weren't allowed to talk about it. I was a part of this intimate relationship and nobody's allowed to even mention they're gay, to say what do they do, what kind of sex do they have or anything. Just to say the word, do they, was so forbidden in all that circle, you would be kicked out if you ever said—people joked about it lightheartedly. It wasn't so important. It didn't really matter.

So there's that world. But then one knows that because of the homophobia that starting with Andy and Bob in the fifties, those abstract painters, which we know as art history, they were homophobic. Their wives were fag hags. I knew them, but they themselves were homophobic. And for anybody who had any aspiration like Bob and Jasper and Andy, it was a big curse, the homophobia, and that's why they weren't understood. That's why they didn't want to allow it into their work or their lives, even to talk about it. No one understood that. So it was never an issue for me, but I'm on the—I was on the other side and I could do it.

Sadly, it had a really—the one negative impact it had on my personal work was that I became overly gay. I put too many gay images in my work in the seventies and maybe into the—no, by eighties I was getting rid of it. I think with AIDS and '81, *Life Is a Killer* [1982], I got rid of the last things from it. But I overdid it for a decade, just because these guys wouldn't do it at all. I look back and it compromised my life. It's not a gay world and I performed not in a gay world, I

performed just for the people of the world in festivals and so I was overly gay. But I don't regret anything. I would do it differently if I saw my life—I would treat it slightly differently maybe.

Q: How?

Giorno: Just not being so obsessive about gay images, being a non-verbal reaction to Bob and Jasper and Andy.

Q: Do you think that there was a transition for them personally, where they felt that there had been a transition in the larger world and they no longer needed to—

Giorno: I don't—because it was never a problem. I don't think either of—any of them liked talking about being gay. Bob, Jasper, it just was off their—but it was their right. It's their lives and this is where they're comfortable, what they've been doing all their lives. Everybody knows we're gay and everybody knows we have—had—have and had lovers, but not making it an issue the way I make it in my life. I'm a part of the gay liberation movement, then. Maybe as a result of that I became heavy-handed as being politically radicalized by that. The political gay was just a part of it. It was politics, the Vietnam War, and all of it. It wasn't just with the gays. But I'm not sure that they ever did—other than Bob with all of his AIDS things. That's sort of a transition that happened.

Q: How did you and Bob sort of move away from each other?

Giorno: Relationships sort of end. I think he was just going through problems with what he was doing with his life and emotionally and otherwise, and I must have had problems. Then he started making—I shouldn't say this—these various guys. He sort of, "I'm going to see my lover tonight." But he was doing that and I can't—I have a life and so I just at some point had enough and it just sort of ended. I didn't call back.

Q: And then you were not so much in touch, but you would—

Giorno: No, then it all—what is this now? It's almost too funny to talk about because it was really over—Bob and I were really over in '68, February. I wrote a poem called *Purple Heart* and that was an installation at the American Federation of Arts, that gallery on the top floor or whatever it was, and it was sort of after those days when I didn't call back. I was just—it was enough. I was taking lots of speed and odd things besides. You have ups and downs, bipolar, that—so I just ended it. If a relationship doesn't work, it's not my business. I don't want to do—there's no point in forcing it to work and that's exactly what Steve—Steve Paxton, it was the same thing. Bob would have loved to just be with me, but then Steve—it was probably early years and none of it was my problem. Then my life went on. William Burroughs came to New York. It changed. William comes—it's 1968. How many things happened in 1968? Columbia College, getting batted on the head by police and getting carted off to jail, and William Burroughs arriving from the Chicago convention and then I spent a month with him—because we were really good friends at that point. A month of August with him and all of that radical politics and Kerouac, [William F.] Buckley, it was all—there were endless things happening and

then strangely—it seems peculiar that something like this should happen—but then in September of 1968, Jasper Johns and I became lovers for—I had known Jasper slightly. I met him in ’61 like Bob, and I maybe saw Jasper more at these parties, like Billy Klüver or with Jill, and he was a much more difficult person than Bob in some ways, but when he talked to you—I was terrified I would say something bad, but at least you had a dialogue. Peter Schjeldahl published my first book of poems and said to me over the previous months, “Why don’t you do a collaboration with Jasper?” Even though Jasper was there—now, it’s something different, but then, he was still this incredibly great person. And I said, “Peter, it’s Jasper.” He says he has this connection to poets—which he did. He did something with Frank O’Hara, or rather it might have been Ted Berrigan, and loved poetry. Like Ugo, he read poetry all the time. And I think Peter nagged me over four months and then I thought, what the fuck? So I called Jasper and he sort of remembered I think, and he said yes, let’s get together. I said, “Come by for tea,” and we made a date for two weeks later. So he came by the end of September or the first days of October, here, and it was never on my mind that Bob—and so we became lovers for the next year and a half—a little more than a year and a half, which was again difficult because it was the same—different politics. The Vietnam War and things got worse and all of that.

That was a very joyous part of my life because in that same period of ’68, I had got the idea for *Dial-A-Poem*, a result of Bob. I’m listening on the telephone and I hear this voice, I was crashing, I was irritable, and I heard a voice—this was in April of ’68. Somebody is gossiping. I had really sort of this loathing, and I said to myself, why do I have to be listening to this wretched gossip? That’s a voice. Those words could be the purity of poetry. Then I was saying to myself, oh, but that’s a great idea. Who knew you could do such a thing. And that’s what started

it. So by October we were in production of poetry—*Dial-A-Poem* and by the time *Dial-A-Poem* first goes operational in December of ’68, Jasper and I had been together three months. Then there was this—I had this enormous success, which Jasper shared with me. I was a joke as this kid and suddenly I was in the *New York Times*, on the NBC’s *Today Show*. Every day of the week it was something. It was either *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* or *Village Voice* or *Harper’s Bazaar* and Jasper was infinitely amused at the—and I was very happy all this was happening. And then that ended because of the conservative politics and somehow my mind—I didn’t—that’s a Jasper story, but we were in Nag’s Head, North Carolina and I had to come back for an installation and I went to Woodstock—instead of going to the Woodstock Festival because Jasper was coming back a week later, and that began the break-up. A few months later, I went to Washington two or three times for the protests and by the end—by November it was over because my life had changed and Jasper wasn’t—and then that great love ended because I was interested in something more than that. And I went on. I wasn’t interested in politics. I gave it all up and went to India and became a formal Tibetan Buddhist and spent all these years in meditation practice.

Q: I have a few more questions for you. How are we doing for time? How are you?

Giorno: I’m—yes.

Q: I wanted to ask you, when you look at the work that you did in the sixties before you began to practice, is there a marked difference?

Giorno: No, because I was—maybe I understood what I was doing more because at Columbia I took those—I had [Theodore] de Bary. In ’56 he started the core curriculum for Asian studies. It was called Oriental art, Oriental humanities, and Oriental philosophy. They changed it to Asian studies, but I took them all in those years of ’56 to –8. So I studied Buddhism at length. I even remember—because I’ve got this memory—I remember at sort of the end of it all, what the philosophy was. It was different than the other ones that we got to Tibetan Buddhism through all the core *yanas*. I remember him saying, Alan Watts was this young kid who was an assistant teacher, we don’t know very much about Tibetan Buddhism because it’s closed, this is ’57 or –8, and there’s a few books in our library and we don’t really know how to read them because they’re blah, blah, blah, and that’s what fascinated me.

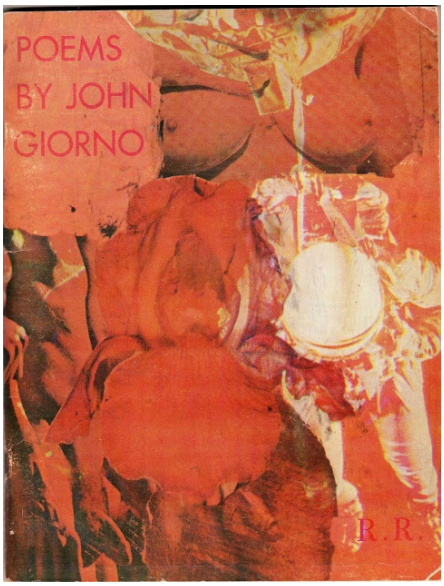
So then, all my life, even in high school, I’d had a propensity to Buddhism. This sounds pretentious, but my heart opened up when we read a line in a poem that had that word in it, et cetera, but somehow Zen Buddhism was not for me. I wouldn’t learn about Zen Buddhism because I was not going to go to the Park Avenue Zen Center to practice. And then it started sort of ass-backwards with my first LSD trips. When you’re having a good LSD trip, it’s great, and when you’re having a bad LSD trip, you realize it’s your mind making the bad LSD trip. It’s not the drug. The drug is sort of this pure substance and then I realized—those were really strong acid trips and I realized that if you did meditation practice—I didn’t know what it was, but if you sat in lotus position, cross your legs, and if you imitated the photograph in *Life* magazine and you closed your eyes and just relaxed, it all went away. Because on LSD, you’re not following your thoughts and you suddenly get another experience. So this became accepted that this could

work in life besides on LSD, so that was the impetus. Then eventually, one knew about the many great Tibetan Lamas that had come in ’59, ’60 and ’61, and by ’69 I certainly knew, and so that’s what I went to find. So I went to India in early—January 1970 and not knowing where I was going, but I had an intuition so I went to—it was sort of friends. Bob Thurman and Nena were going back to see the Dalai Lama. I went and visited them. And then I went to see the Dalai Lama and Bob Thurman was the first Western monk the Dalai Lama ever ordained, and Nena is my friend because she’s the wife of Timothy Leary, I took many LSD trips with Nena and Tim Leary up in Rhinebeck [New York]. So they’re going back and Bob is bringing his wife back to meet the Dalai Lama with their two kids, and he says to me, “Do you want to come?” And so I went. And I had this intimate experience. I sat back because the Dalai Lama is seeing Bob for the first time in eight years and this is—so I had a miraculous week. But that’s not my trip. I then went on after that to find my teacher, who was Dudjom Rinpoche, and the head of the Nyingma tradition, which I felt an affinity for and just followed my heart and I’ve been doing practice now for—almost for forty-five years.

Q: I’m just going to look through this for a moment. Oh, I brought this [cover Rauschenberg designed for *Poems by John Giorno*, 1967].

Giorno: Oh that, yes. See, that’s about as sexual as Bob could get. That was pushing it [laughs], but that made me so happy, that he did such a thing.

Q: Did you have a conversation about this cover or did you just ask—



left:
Cover of *Poems by John Giorno* (1967) designed by Rauschenberg

right:
Robert Rauschenberg
Trapeze, 1964
Oil and silkscreen ink on two canvases
120 x 48 inches (304.8 x 121.9 cm)
Private collection

Giorno: I collaborated with a million people. I never opened my mouth because the fact that he even—the fact that there's a paratrooper—I haven't looked at this in so long. But the paratrooper image, that was so Bob, that's almost like asking Jasper to do a flag—just no. It was truly—those are silly words, but a labor of love.

Q: You mentioned earlier that when Andy Warhol died, you were flooded with memories. Were there memories that came back to you when Bob died?

Giorno: No, because—it was just a different sequence of events. It was sort of—because with Andy, I did not write prose. I was really a poet only and maybe I wrote a one-and-a-half-page essay or something, but I was not a writer. Prose is a different art form. Like drawing is an art form and watercolor is an art form, prose is—writing prose is another art form. It's completely

different than poetry. It's like another main artery. I have this ability to remember conversations, which I discovered sort of with Andy, because sometimes he wasn't hearing what I said. In sort of powerful situations, often the way the mind is, is you remember something you said. Probably because you thought about it more than once saying it. It lingers in your mind. Then if you're lucky like mine, when I do these things, you remember the next day what somebody says back to you and so that's what I discovered with Andy. You've got to do this now because it's twenty-five years later. And those pieces which were a little bit primitive appeared in my book in '94 and then I'd been working ever since.

Then when Bob died, I was probably really busy, so it was—and then followed a little bit of the history in those latter years, and so he died and that was it. But what happened then, I have a good friend called Franz Wassmer, a really good friend of Ugo Rondinone and myself, and he's a very rich Swiss man who's a great collector and very close to our lives because Ugo is Swiss. And in Paris—he's since sold it, but in Paris he had a—next to the Palais de Tokyo, he had a great late nineteenth century art nouveau palais, because he's a billionaire, and he restored it and Ugo and I stayed a few years in the guest house, and he gave—my seventieth birthday party he gave me in the grand—but he was a great collector of art and had many of those gigantic paintings in this house. The rose series [*Beau + Errors (Anagram [A Pun])*, 1998], which he always claimed that he got from Bob and that Bob called the "saves." But somehow he was able to buy them all. So I visited there many times and it was always a pleasure. It was long after my seventieth birthday, but whether it was one time I was there by myself, because Ugo had a show with—but a lot of times I had to go and suddenly it hit me that Bob was dead two or three years and I started the memoir then and by then I had developed all these skills of memory and

conversation and methods and then generally these things take me a year and half to write and that's the ninety pages in my memoir. Which I haven't thought about because I finished that eight or ten years ago because that was in the early 2000s, so I haven't thought about these things that we're talking about since, until today.

Robert Rauschenberg
Beau + Errors (Anagram [A Pun]), 1998
Inkjet pigment transfer on polylaminate
97 1/2 x 61 inches (247.7 x 154.9 cm)
Private collection

Q: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think you would like to share, or to talk about? Any other memories?

Giorno: I don't know. We talked about so much, there's probably other things to talk about but this is good, yes?

Q: Yes. Okay well, thank you.

Giorno: Well, thank you.

Q: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]