Giorno, John, 1936-

John Giorno letters to William Levy
1965-1966

Abstract:
Descriptive Summary

Identification: MSS 099, F474
Creator: Giorno, John, 1936-
Title: John Giorno letters to William Levy
Inclusive Dates: 1965-1966
Extent: 10 items
Extent: Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

Citation: MSS 099 F474, John Giorno letters to William Levy, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.
Shelving Summary: Box 28, F474: Shelved in SPEC MSS 099
Location: Special Collections, University of Delaware Library Newark, Delaware 19717-5267 Phone: 302-831-2229 Fax: 302-831-6003 URL: http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/
Processing: Processed and encoded by Sean Lovitt, October 2014.
Access Restrictions: The collection is open for research.
Terms Governing Use and Reproduction: Use of materials from this collection beyond the exceptions provided for in the Fair Use and Educational Use clauses of the U.S. Copyright Law may violate federal law. Permission to publish or reproduce is required from the copyright holder. Please contact Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, http://www.lib.udel.edu/cgi-bin/askspec.cgi
Biographical Notes

John Giorno

American poet John Giorno (born 1936) played a formative role in the literary culture that connects the Beats to the New York School of poetry. Through his literary experiments and collaborations with other poets and artists, including American artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) and American author William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), he helped develop the phenomenon of multimedia performance art.

After graduating from Columbia University in 1958, Giorno became involved in the New York art scene. In 1962, he met American painter and filmmaker Andy Warhol (1928-1987), who cast Giorno in a leading role in his film Sleep (1963). Attempting to apply the concepts from Warhol's Pop Art paintings to poetry, Giorno wrote a series of found poems that took lines from everyday life and fashioned them into a poetic shape. These poems were collected in a privately circulated book, The American Book of the Dead (1964). Around this time, Giorno met William Burroughs and English visual artist, writer, and performance artist Brion Gysin (1916-1986), who introduced him to their poetic cut-up technique as well as tape-recorder poetry. Giorno also applied this interest in the relationship between poetry and technology to experiment with synthesizers alongside American inventor and electronic musician Robert Moog (1934-2005).

The events of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery acted as a kind of laboratory for Giorno's poetic experiments. There, in 1967, he developed Electronic Sensory Poetry Environments (ESPE), which, inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's "happenings," incorporated poetry played on recording devices, synthesizers, and light shows that transformed the words into colors. Giorno was also instrumental in Radio Free Poetry, which broadcast from the Poetry Project.

This emphasis on mediation continued in his Dial-a-Poem series (1968-1977), which implemented a telephonic system that allowed callers to hear short poems from over 700 selections, including pieces by American poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Burroughs, and Giorno. When Burroughs returned to New York in 1977, Giorno involved him in the Poetry Project, which lead to the two authors venturing on a poetry tour together. Their performance in Toronto, Canada, inspired the film Poetry in Motion.

In the 1980s, Giorno focused his attention on AIDS activism. His work from this period reflects his concern with the medical, economics, and social consequences of the disease. Giorno established the AIDS Treatment Project, which offers support to people living with AIDS.

Sources:

William Levy
Bill (William) Levy (born 1939) was the founder and editor of various magazines, including the poetry journal *Insect Trust Gazette*. While studying at Temple University in 1964, Levy and several other students created the *Insect Trust Gazette*, naming it after a quote from William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959). The magazine ran from 1964 to 1968, and published a variety of authors, including Burroughs. After departing for Europe in 1966, Levy went on to found and edit several little magazines. Later, he became the European editor for the popular magazines *High Times* and *Penthouse*. In Amsterdam, he hosted a weekly doo-wop radio show.

**Sources:**

Scope and Content Note


Through references to visits from authors, trips to Tangier, Morocco, and publishing written works, the letters reveal Giorno and Levy's shared literary circle. A central figure in their correspondence was English visual artist, writer, and performance artist Brion Gysin (1916-1986), who, during the period the letters cover, visited Giorno with American author William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), submitted a poem to Levy's magazine, *Insect Trust Gazette*, and hosted both Giorno and Levy on their journeys.

The form of the letters display Giorno's poetic style and creative influences. Several of the letters suggest found poems with sculpted line breaks, while others show the impact of Gysin's cut-up technique on Giorno's writing (one fragment of a letter appears to have been literally cut). In Giorno's swirling and often jarring syntax, various figures from his social milieu emerge, including the poets Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) and Kenward Elmslie (born 1929), the Tangier scholar and poet Mohammed Abu-Talib (1930-2000), the dancer and fellow star of a Warhol film Fredie Herko (1936-1964), artist and art historian Suzi Gablik (born 1934), the founder of mail art Ray Johnson (1927-1995), literary agent Peter Matson, and patron of New York artists Panna Grady.

While it is often difficult to reconstruct a narrative from his scrambled images, at times Giorno's writing becomes surprisingly lucid, describing events in detail. In one letter, Giorno recounts his day walking around during the Northeastern blackout of 1965. In another, he narrated a tourist expedition to the Merinid Tombs in Fez, Morocco, and reported the sequence of his LSD hallucinations.
Selected Search Terms

Alternate Title
Insect trust gazette.

Personal Names
Giorno, John--Correspondence.
Levy, William, 1939- --Correspondence.
Gysin, Brion.

Topical Terms
Authors, American--20th century--Correspondence.
Literature, Experimental--United States.

Form/Genre Terms
Correspondence.

Occupation
Authors.
Editors (assembling, revising)
Poets.

Personal Contributors
Levy, William, 1939- , correspondent.

Related Materials in this Repository
This item forms part of MSS 099 Miscellaneous Literary and Historical Manuscripts.
MSS 163 Paul Bowles papers
**Detailed Description of the Collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Box and Folder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965 August 30</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965 September 9</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut fragment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965 October 19</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[1965] November 27</td>
<td>Advertisement for John Giorno reading</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965 December 18</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 January 8</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 January 26</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 January 27</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 February 12</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 July 9</td>
<td>John Giorno letter to William Levy</td>
<td>Box 28 F474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>