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YOU'VE GOT TO BE
ASSERTIVE AT THE
BEGINNING OF YOUR
CAREER,

BECAUSE IF YOU'RE
TOO NICE PEOPLE WILL
DO WHATEVER THEY
WANT AND TAKE
ADVANTAGE OF YOU.

- Glenn Ligon

BE TOUGH FIRST
AND
NICE LATER.

Richard Pryor, *That Nigger's Crazy*, 1974
Photograph printed on paperboard album cover
12 3/8 × 12 3/8 inches | 31.4 × 31.4 cm
Cover photograph by Howard Bingham
© 1974 Howard Bingham

Glenn Ligon, Emmanuel Olunkwa, and Lorna Simpson in Conversation

Emmanuel Olunkwa
As people who have staged many exhibitions, what do you think about the title *Evil Nigger*?

Glenn Ligon
I first made work using the word "nigger" for the Whitney Biennial in 1993, when I used Richard Pryor's stand-up material as texts for paintings. At one point, Pryor had been to Africa and said he'd stop using the word because someone asked him on the trip, "Do you see any niggers here?" And he said, "No."

Lorna Simpson
It didn't last long at all. [*Laughs.*]

GL When Ebony [L. Haynes] and I talked about using Julius Eastman's composition *Evil Nigger* (1979) as the title for the exhibition, there were different considerations at play. Eastman was keenly aware of its provocation, as it is one of his "Bad Boys," as he said, from the suite of titles he named his works spanning from *Evil Nigger* to *Crazy Nigger* and *Gay Guerilla* (1979). The title made me think about the political moment that we're in and how these words would function in public, as opposed to the interior space of the gallery or as the title of a musical composition.

LS In college in the late 1970s, I remember reading about Donald Newman's *Nigger Drawings* (1979) show at Artists Space in *The Village Voice*. I didn't go to see the show, but I was like, "Oh, a white guy did this?!" And this was also at the height of Richard Pryor's career, too. Newman's work created a new inflection point, and he had no explanation, he plainly said, "Oh, they're charcoal drawings that are free in their own way." But in this current political climate, in 2025, we're seeing a return to its meaning by white people in its use and iteration of the 1920s, and '30s. I also feel that music history has enveloped the word "nigger" so much in terms of black music, but also literature, that it doesn't stand in the world, at this moment, just for the use of white people as it once did.

GL These same questions come up in the context of Percival Everett's novel *James* (2024). The book deals with the journey of the protagonist, James, reclaiming his name after having been known as "Nigger Jim" in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Everett was like, "Well, his name is James now." But you're right, in terms of music and black popular culture, the word is everywhere, in many forms, now. What's the joke? The use of "a" instead of "er" makes all the difference. [*Laughs.*] You can't totally control how a word is used or received.

EO What was the context of the word "nigger" in the 1980s and the '90s?

LS We both share Richard Pryor. One could recite his jokes from listening to the albums like *That Nigger's Crazy* (1974), or go to the movies to see his live performances as theatrical releases.

GL In the seventies, when we were old enough to buy our own albums.

LS My parents had those albums. [*Laughs.*]

GL Oh, I had to buy my own or ask my older cousins to. As my mother would say, "That's too grown for you." Because that word, "nigger," was too adult and wasn't one she would have used. It's interesting though how transgressive the word was, and yet Pryor's use of it made it part of pop culture.

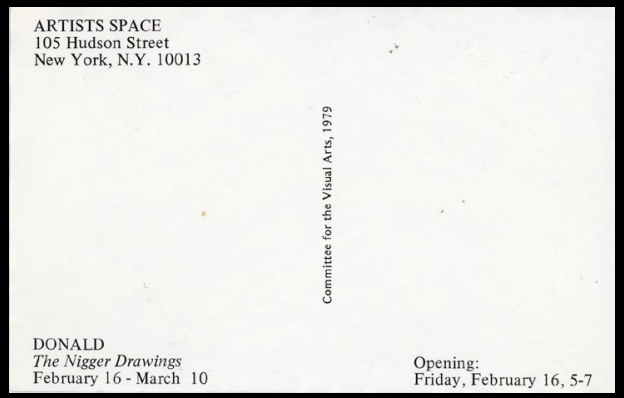
LS There was a specificity and intention to its usage. Like, "Nigger please, get the fuck out of here!" You know, like there were all these different iterations of the word and the context in which you might use it. It became part of our shared language. We could sing along or recite the jokes, and it would make everybody crack up because everyone knew the references. Again, it was this beautiful kind of writing, like Paul Mooney's, where it became a way of expression.

EO You're both born in 1960. Are there any cultural distinctions between being born in the Bronx and Queens?

GL Well, in the outer boroughs we had a different relationship to "the city," by which people meant Manhattan. In the neighborhood in the Bronx that I grew up in, the subway line had signs that read "to city" and "from city" because originally it was a commuter train that got turned into a subway line. That was the mentality: You were going to "the city."

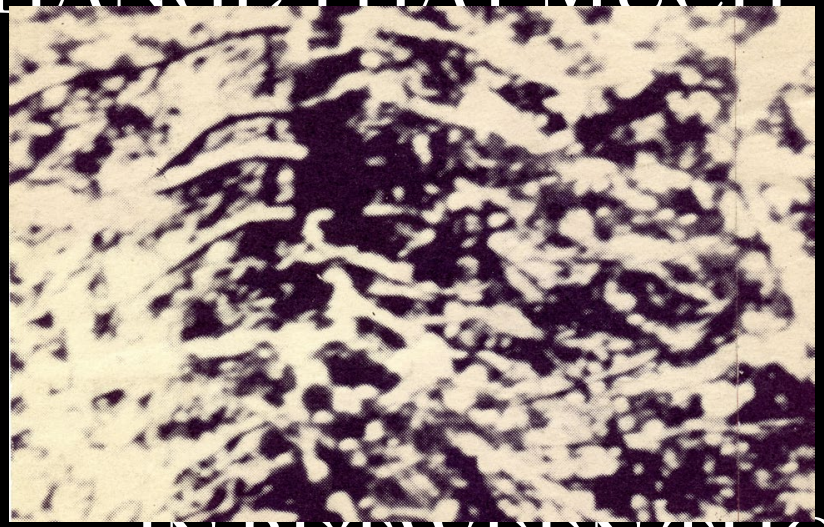
LS Yes, even in Queens, people were like, "Oh, you're going into the city." We would look at them like, "Oh my God, we're just getting the subway. Calm down."

GL If you've ever seen the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, that's what it's all about: the politics of navigating the city and the sense of achievement of having a Manhattan zip code and telephone number, which is all bullshit, but it seemed very real at the time. But in terms of the word "nigger," and what you were saying Lorna, it did circulate and was frequently discussed. My parents



THE WORLD DIDN'T CHANGE THAT MUCH IN BETWEEN THOSE INTERVENING YEARS.

- Lorna Simpson



Donald Newman, *The Nigger Drawings*, 1979
Image courtesy Artists Space, New York

were like, "Don't you say that in front of me," even though they loved Pryor.

I remember the controversy and conversation around my Pryor paintings in Thelma Golden's *Black Male* show at the Whitney Museum in 1994. People were like, "Why are these jokes on the wall?" I remember someone saying in the show, "Don't you like Richard Pryor?" (this was a black person speaking to another black person), and another person replied, "I love Richard Pryor … at home. Not in public." There was the sense that this conversation wasn't meant for other kinds of folks. I guess they thought, "If we bring this conversation out in public we can't control it."

EO Why did you love Pryor so much?

LS Those performances and albums created this camaraderie amongst us, around humor and language. Of course I was reading tons of books and had my extracurricular activities going, but hanging out with all these young men from my neighborhood was a magical moment of my childhood, before the pressures of living in the world as an adult person took hold of me. We had this amazing kind of intimacy, but also I got to know them in terms of their senses of humor, their use of language. And then that all went away, in a way. Because some of them, though not all of my friends, either ended up in the military, in jail, or fell victim to drugs.

EO It's affirming to hear that humor drives so much of your practices. You both have such a clear understanding of and knack for language. Glenn, both in terms of your work in the 1994 *Black Male* show, and Lorna in your earlier photography work in 1985, with *Waterbearer*.

Lorna Simpson, *Waterbearer*, 1986
Silver gelatin print, vinyl lettering
59 × 80 × 2 1/2 inches | 149.9 × 203.2 × 5.7 cm
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.
© Lorna Simpson. Photo by James Wang

LS Yes, because everyone was obsessed with documentary photography and portraiture at the time. "Oh, so who is that? Where are they from? What kind of family do they come from? What do they look like?" We were in the midst of this serious wave of autobiographical projection onto portraiture that had everything to do with the viewer's obsessions. The viewer had so many expectations and assumptions that were placed onto the image. So that series of work is about releasing the viewer from creating that diagram of all these narratives in their head that hold you back. "I don't know who this is. I don't know what this is. I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking at." I think that Glenn uses language in that way, too. It's this fascination to create something that's multifaceted. It has all these different slight variations that can mean something else.

GL I think that's the intersection that binds our practice, because I was using quotations in the same way. It was to say, "This isn't autobiographical. This is stuff that is out in the world. This is bits and pieces of an enslaved person's narrative. This is a Richard Pryor joke. This is a Baldwin text." So it was a way of getting past that simple autobiographical reading, which was like, "Oh, your work is about your identity as a black gay man," as if that were something I had automatic, unmediated access to, or that it was thoroughly known or knowable.

LS Like you were giving your subjectivity away on a platter: "Here it is!"

GL Yes, I would just dip in the well of blackness and offer up a cup of it to drink.

EO In terms of material and subject matter, there's a dance that you have to do in order to create new meaning through work. How do you both navigate that kind of choreography?

GL Well, in terms of this show, I think that comes from the choreography of the exhibited pieces themselves. Though I made some works in dialogue with Eastman, I think that's the sign of a successful show, because there is a kind of inherent yet formal choreography at play.

LS Or resonance, since we're also talking sound. It resonates.

GL Yeah, resonance. I'm especially thinking about my neon work, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)* (2024), and the sonic dimension of it. Though I don't make sound works, I want language to evoke sound or have resonance with the idea of speaking. The sth or tsh sound is not formally a word, it's a sound, which also has

meaning. But it's tricky because—

LS It's also a gesture.

GL Yeah, it is a gesture. There are many ways to put it into language. Actually, that piece, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, came out of a group chat that you, Lorna, were in, where I asked people about the teeth sucking sound. Toni Morrison spells it "sth." I asked everyone on the chat, "How would you spell it?" And it was an amazing discussion; I still have it somewhere. But it was like, you, Hilton [Als], Robin Coste Lewis, Darren Walker, maybe Elizabeth Alexander, and Thelma? We were all on this chat trying to figure it out, like, "Oh, that's how you spell it? Yeah, how do you spell that?" It was amazing.

I was thinking about sound in relation to Eastman and particularly his scores. I don't read music, so I'm just seeing them as verbal keys and cues. I'm particularly interested in the way he writes the instructions for the choruses in his compositions, which led me to create *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)* (2024), inspired by an Eastman score.

Glenn Ligon, *Rückenfigur*, 2009
Neon and paint
24 × 145 × 4 inches | 61 × 368.3 × 10.2 cm; edition of 3 and 2 APs
© Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.

EO Had you previously made work in response to someone's practice like this?

GL The Baldwin paintings are in relation to a specific essay. His work has a density and weight that I wanted to embody in my paintings, which led me to work with coal dust. I wanted to use it as a material to showcase the density, gravity, and abjectness in his work. Coal dust is a waste product which I elevated into the space of art. I think Baldwin would have understood this move conceptually because he often talks about speaking from the place of the disteemed, a place where you can see and understand society more clearly. Elevating a waste product to art would have made sense to him. Also, Baldwin spent ten years off and on in Turkey, and speaks about how American power is better observed from a distance, from another place.

LS Unfortunately for me, there's no formula. You know, with the show that I just had at Hauser & Wirth, *Earth & Sky*, it was about a passage in a book that I looked at a couple of years ago, where a paragraph stood out. But then, two years later, I revisited the text and thought, "Wait a minute. That's amazing." My exhibitions tend to focus on whatever I'm doing or thinking about at the moment, or if I'm looking to find something of interest to build work around. But I can't say there's always a path. Sometimes it feels accidental. But I also can't make work in a prescriptive way. It doesn't come to me like that.

EO Glenn, what's your version of this story? Earlier you mentioned that you enjoy when you're invited to collaborate on an exhibition with a solid concept.

GL Well, I've been listening to Eastman for a while. I was introduced to his music during Okwui Enwezor's 56th Venice Biennale, in 2015, where the closing day performances were pianists playing Eastman compositions. I've also been thinking about Eastman as a kind of renegade political figure. Most people's idea of new music or the avant-garde musical tradition is based on white performers. Eastman didn't have a natural place in that. In *Gay Guerilla*, in the middle of the composition, he samples Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (c. 1531). And so I think of his process as a useful model for making work, which is what I aspire to do, by bringing all my references and influences in to create something new. But what you were saying was interesting, Lorna, we do share similar processes. Something sticks in our head, and we're trying to figure out a way to use it, you know. So you read that paragraph about meteors—

LS And I was like, "Oh my God, that's something I don't know."

EO Lorna, I read somewhere that Carrie Mae Weems is the reason why you went to the University of California, San Diego, for your MFA.

GL Oh, Carrie Mae?

LS Right, I was working, doing graphic design. And she's like, "Why don't you try going to San Diego?" And I was like, "What's San Diego? What's in San Diego?" And she was like, "Oh, well, there's a beach." And I was like, "Okay." I had gotten out of college early at the School of Visual Arts, so I was looking for something to do. But once I was in California, it took me a year to stop going to the beach with wine and chicken at five o'clock to watch the sunset. San Diego was a completely different racial and intellectual environment than New York.

GL Wine and chicken? Sounds like heaven.

EO You and Carrie were talking about how you were in New York and it was too cold.

LS It was. I was like, "You can actually just get to drive and go to the beach, sit down." And it took me a year to settle into myself and say, "Okay, so what kind of intellectual life am I having?" But I did find it to be a place that was really isolating because many of the other graduate students were from the Midwest or from other parts of California. They'd never been anywhere else, so my experiences in life were much different. And I just found that I didn't have the energy after coming from the beach to engage, explain, or battle for my voice to be heard within a seminar environment. So I was just pretty antisocial in a way.

EO But how did that manifest in the work?

LS I didn't care about my fellow graduate students. I really took it as is. I didn't want to change schools. I didn't want to make a referendum that they're being crazy and racist. I was like, "Fuck this, I'm only here for two years. It's beautiful in a different way than New York. Let me figure out what I want to do." So I settled into the isolation of just working. I was in a really crazy military, right-wing but beautiful environment that I could step out of. My mother was ill with cancer too at that time. So I was going back and forth to New York, maybe quarterly, and I just felt like, "No, I'm going to use this time to really just figure out what I want to do with my work."

EO How did the environment change the questions that you were asking yourself?

LS I think Southern California was much more about conceptual art in a way than New York at that time. So that was a kind of bed for that thinking. But also, performance art was really the thing on the rise in both places in different ways.

I first saw Whoopi Goldberg when Whoopi Goldberg was working as a performance artist doing sketches at this space called SUSHI Performance & Visual Arts in San Diego, that Lynn Schuette founded in 1980. I'm not sure if it was run by Eric Bogosian at the time, but I did see him. It was a cultural hub where a lot of young people performed throughout the eighties. I mean, like, anyone prominent you can think of, who's more of an actor now, really performed there first. It was a time period off of the late seventies, and so everyone at UCSD was doing performance art. I'm not really a performance person, but the performative element and aspect was an interesting idea to play with in order to break this frame I was thinking in. It gave me the language of how to construct an image of a portrait instead of performing and relying on realism. But I really loved being in UCSD, it was a rigorous and conceptual environment to be in.

EO You said that San Diego was conceptually focused. But what was the New York school of thought at that time?

LS I mean, having gone to art high school in New York and then the School of Visual Arts, performance work dominated. Like I would go to clubs on the Lower East Side to see performance art. And I'm not saying there wasn't much performance being shown on an institutional level, but it was different.

EO Was it more theory driven?

LS No, I mean to me the most interesting courses that I took were focused on technical skills and asking questions of life, like, "What are you going to do for a job?" You know, like I said, "If you're going to be a painter, learn oil painting. If you're going to be a photographer, then learn documentary film." There were all these applications to the real world that felt more necessary and urgent.

GL So you saw performance in clubs, but not in school.

LS No, it wasn't in school. I'd be up in Harlem, or I was roving around New York in a way that would afford experience by being

out of school. But the one course that I thought was amazing was taught by Joan Braderman on cinema, conceptual film, and French New Wave. It was amazing and made me think about the structure of film. Like, what you take for granted in terms of sound and language in relationship with image and time. I learned about Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). That kind of really sparked my interest in terms of thinking about and framing things conceptually. But most of the other stuff that I learned was technical.

EO This resonates. It's surprising to hear you reference Chantal Akerman because time operates in a different register within black, rather than white, artwork.

LS Break that down. When I'm looking at Eastman's work and reading about him, I see what you're saying about time, it makes me think about the space that he was not given to occupy. Even the reviews of his work being like, "Oh, he's a good singer, or he's not. But he didn't sing this right. Or he's a great composer, but he didn't play that note right and he's not giving it his all." Like, there's all this constant narrowing of his practice in a way that gives him no room to expand or improvise or do anything inventive at any turn. It's very frustrating to read through biographies on him, in a way.

EO And it's true. Both your and Glenn's work appear to be very restrained yet formal, but there is so much layered meaning. It makes sense why scores like Eastman's are so long and exaggerated. Because we can't refute or deny the duration of frustration in the composition, or intervene.

GL Well, I think for me, what's interesting about Eastman is he embraces a kind of indeterminacy, in the sense that you don't quite know how to play the scores. There's a lot of leeway. For example, "sparse shouts." What does that mean as a direction for singers? And that indeterminacy isn't very [John] Cagean.

LS Yes, Cagean has a whole lot of fucking rules.

GL [*Laughs.*] And so that infamous performance where John Cage didn't like the way Eastman staged one of his works, it's like, "Oh, indeterminacy for Cage has boundaries." And I think Eastman's genius is realizing that you can inhabit classical structure with indeterminacy. He's like, "I'm interested in structure but I'm also interested in indeterminacy. Let's meet in the middle, let me make my pieces…"

LS And what is said when Cage is seen doing the same thing? "Oh, it's coincidental."

GL Right, right, right. Except when he don't like it. [*Laughs.*]

LS Or all the rules creep in as soon as you do something that isn't done how I like it.

GL This reminds me of a story about Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1978), a series of actions and gestures that happen onstage, the steps of which are famously transmitted visually and verbally from dancer to dancer. Supposedly she saw a performance of the piece she didn't like and had a similar reaction as Cage. But if you give instructions for a piece, you know, a score that says, "There's a roll here, there's a kick here," and you don't dictate precisely what those things look like or trust others to teach the steps, then in some ways you have to accept the outcome. I think Eastman was precise in his compositions but he also wanted to push past that precision.

LS But it also applies a different structure to the music, in terms of jazz improvisation.

GL Yes.

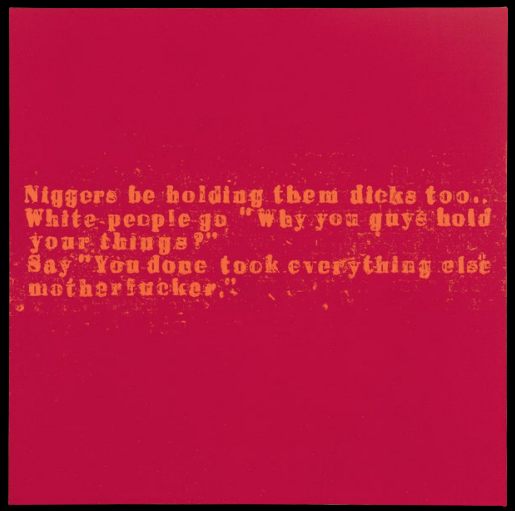
LS You create these frameworks where someone can come in, and they can be inventive. It takes the music into a completely different direction to be then turned around slowly or quickly, or allows itself to return to a new ending. And so I think he was trying to bridge those things.

GL Yep, yep, yep. I remember someone asking the musician George Lewis, "Is there such a thing as a mistake in improvisation?" And he said, "Yes, the mistake is when you miss the chance to come in." If you don't come in at the right moment, that's the mistake. So people think improvisation has no structure, but it actually does. I find that kind of attunement to indeterminacy and rigor really beautiful. And I think you're right that Eastman was trying to bridge a lot of different practices to pull all these strings together in his work. And it's inspiring for me as an artist, because it gives me new ways to think about my own work.

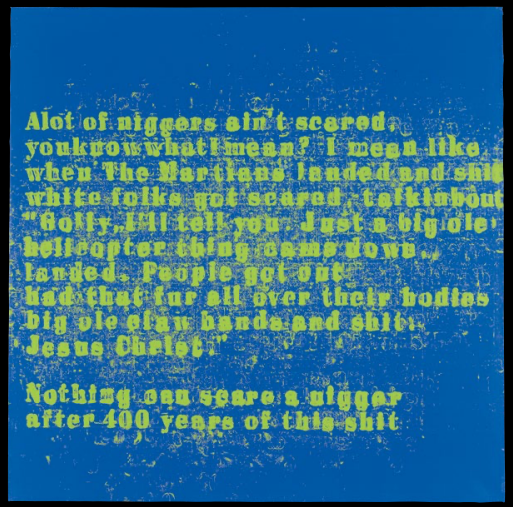
EO What's both of your relationships with improvisation?

LS Oh, I will always put myself in a position like, "What the fuck am I doing now?" No, really, like—

GL This is why Lorna's much braver than I am. I'm usually like, "Oh, let me do another one of those." [*Laughs.*] Lorna is always



Glenn Ligon, *Cocaine (Pimps)*, 1993
Oil stick, synthetic polymer, and graphite on linen
32 × 32 inches | 81.3 × 81.3 cm
Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.
© Glenn Ligon



Glenn Ligon, *Niggers Ain't Scared*, 1996
Oil stick, synthetic polymer, and graphite on linen
30 1/10 × 30 1/10 inches | 76.5 × 76.5 cm
Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.
© Glenn Ligon

on the cutting edge . . . she's like, "What's the next challenge?" Which is the way that the work stays fresh.

LS But it is a thing of not being afraid. The idea is what matters at the end of it.

EO Yes, but you possess the essential technical skills.

LS No, not always. Or not perceived by me. I don't lead with technical skills.

EO I mean it in the way that you've developed your intuition and created language specific to your practice. Like you understand how to make a Lorna Simpson work or produce a piece of writing, and what it needs to feel like.

LS I think what I've learned is that there's an inherent improvisation that comes with making work. The moment I approach anything with the attitude of, "I know how to do that," then it kind of collapses. I have to be really present in the process or it doesn't work. It's not about proficiency or knowing. It's about mistakes. When something goes left, it's important to have an awareness of when to let go. As opposed to maintaining a course where you think it's necessary to go.

EO I would say those are also the mechanics and skills of being a good editor.

LS Yes, but you have to understand. I feel that I have a career because of Glenn and our exchanges, and because of my conversations with Adrienne Edwards or with Thelma [Golden]. Like, you have to create this collective of people that you can go to whenever about whatever, it's not only about the work. When I was first making work at UC San Diego, I was in the darkroom by myself developing my thesis. In defending it, no one said anything. And I was a little pissed, and was like, "If these motherfuckers fail me, wow." And they didn't. But then I thought, "Okay, that's really interesting that nobody had anything to say."

And so I came back to New York with that work and visited Kellie Jones and other curators; suddenly there was a lot of new enthusiasm around it. And that's when it clicked for me that you could be in conversation with people, but you'd have to cultivate it for yourself. It made me realize that I don't need to have outside recognition for what I'm doing to proceed. You just need to proceed.

GL That's a hard lesson to learn. But you're absolutely right. I have a tight circle of friends who will come over to the studio and I'll ask, "Does this suck or is it okay?" And if they say it sucks, it's going in the trash or back in the Crock-Pot. You know, like those *Pirate* works, y'all saw them in the studio years ago. It took me all that time to kind of get to a point where I thought, "Okay, these are ready to be out in the world." So to your point about editing, Emmanuel, yes. But Lorna's right that it's also about living with mistakes too, I find. Your conscious mind tells you to do one thing, but your unconscious leads the work to where it's meant to go.

LS Every time.

GL Working with the unconscious is a much more productive space for me. To the point about improvisation that I was making earlier, knowing when to veer off route has been important. The other day somebody asked me about Jack Whitten, assuming that he'd always been someone I was in dialogue with. They were like, "Let's talk about Jack Whitten's influence on you as a young artist." It's funny to me because when I was in school, I had to find Jack Whitten, nobody was teaching his work at the time. The nicest thing has been developing an artistic community, because when I got out of school, I didn't have it.

Nobody was talking about Jack Whitten when I was in college. People weren't talking about the ancestors. I had to find them, and it took a long time. What you have to realize is that the discourse in the early 1990s around black artists was generally reductive. Especially in 1994, with Thelma's *Black Male* exhibition at the Whitney. And all the critiques around the show were horrible, but now everybody's come to Jesus, and the show is seen as a milestone. But at the moment, people were like, "What is this?"

EO But weren't you both in the swing of your practice?

LS You have to remember that at the time we never understood that we were making it, professionally.

EO Meaning?

LS Success. When I started out, the idea that I would be successful wasn't likely, at most I thought, "Well, maybe I'll have to be a secretary. I could quit my job answering phones."

GL Me and my law firm job. [*Laughs.*]

LS Exactly. I was working for Sandoz pharmaceutical company answering phones. I didn't have any idea like, "Oh, and I'm going to have a gallery, and I'm gonna make a lot of money." It didn't occur to me that I was on that path.

GL You have to understand, in a way we're like first generation black artists who had steady mainstream gallery representation.

EO Yes, it's why it's important we got to speak with both of you.

GL People came to know Jack Whitten, Frank Bowling, Faith Ringgold, et cetera. All the while, Jack Whitten was teaching to get by. I saw his journals, where he's like, "Barnett Newman's wife hired me to paint their apartment so I can pay my rent for the next three months." That was his life. Solo gallery show or show at the Whitney aside, the career was not guaranteed. We were often the first black artists in the galleries that we were showing with in the nineties.

LS Absolutely.

GL So our careers weren't guaranteed, because we didn't see anyone else who was like us.

EO I'm curious to hear from you because your careers have grown in tandem with the industry itself. Can you speak more to that?

LS I would say, and I think this may be true, for Glenn too, is that we were mainly interested in conversations with curators and writers. At the time, it wasn't about making money, but making books. Books on the work were really important to both of us.

EO Why was that?

LS To be able to choose the writers so that you have a voice, can exist within a context, and have a source that aligns with the writer's voice. It was about creating a cohesive dynamic between the work and its trajectory, writers, and forming our own community. It was serious.

GL I still marvel that Saidiya Hartman wrote an essay for my mid-career retrospective, *America* (2011), at the Whitney. Now she is very embedded in the art world, but she wasn't so much at that moment.

LS And you had to be very specific about that desire. Nothing was a given when we were coming up. Sure, they'd approach you like, "Oh, we got this project, this book format, and these writers." But it wasn't thoughtful. Because then they'd come back and say, "Well, we want you to use Joe Schmo." Like, no, no, no. It taught me early on that every opportunity that was presented to me wasn't necessarily a good one. I had to be discerning. For my first gallery show, they wanted to make a small pamphlet kind of book. And the gallerist was like, "Oh, we've got this guy that we want you to use," who will go nameless. [*Laughs.*] And I read some of his words, and I was like, "Oh, no, Kellie Jones is going to write the text." And I refused. He was a little bit taken aback. "How could you say no to that?" I was like, "Because I don't know him, and I don't like his writing. Let's move on. Let's do something else."

EO How did you have and trust this clarity so early on?

LS I think, because we were so young. Thelma was just coming up as a young curator, Kellie was an art historian, and Greg Tate was writing for *The Village Voice*. There was just this milieu of people who were working in film, criticism, and art who were making it in their careers at the same time, and we were all in conversation with each other. That was really important. And it existed outside the purview of the gallery world, in a way. And the museum world was a little bit more narrow at that time, too. So, you couldn't not fight for it, you had to be insistent and direct. Like, "This is what I want. This is how it's going to work." And I think to this day that's kind of true. You have to be persistent about who writes on your work. Like, you have to be mindful as you're building out your career.

GL Yes, everyone was in dialogue. I had an internship at the Studio Museum in Harlem, while Kellie Jones was there working as an assistant curator. So, I met her in 1983, and Thelma and I met when she worked for Kellie, at the Jamaica Arts Center. We kind of grew up with the people who we were in dialogue with and who became super important in terms of disseminating the ideas around our work. We wanted those folks to be writing about our work rather than some random person, or someone who the gallery thought was best because "so-and-so is an important critic."

LS So those were the things we had to think about and navigate. "What is this opportunity? Why am I doing this? What kind of choices am I making?" There was so much press, but rarely of good quality, especially on black people's work and with group shows. It was just clear and made us aware, like, "Nah, I gotta get this right."

GL Yeah.

EO This is obviously a rhetorical question, but how much weight did a review in *The New York Times* have?

LS Oh, I'll let you . . . Am I talking too much? [*Laughs.*]

GL [*Laughs.*] No, no, no. They were important because they were gatekeepers. Roberta Smith reviewed one of my shows and essentially said it was presentation art. And I had to ask somebody, "What does this mean?" They said, "Oh, I think she means your show feels like something you would present as the idea of what you're going to make when you make the art." Ouch. Now I don't care, but at that moment, when you're a young artist and you're getting reviewed in the *Times*, it's like, "Yes, that's bad." It felt dire in a way that I don't think it does now—

LS Doesn't matter.

GL Doesn't matter but at the time, it felt like . . .

LS I think many of our white counterparts chased Roberta Smith or those reviewers at the *Times*, in that kind of quasi-social way, to get their attention. And I think we just realized early on and thought, (a) "I'm not going to read it anymore," And (b) "There's another way to go at this, for the long term, with what you think about your own legacy or having a record of how you're thinking about the work at a particular point in time." We had to learn to read the writing on the walls.

GL Yeah. A prominent critic said to me once, in our initial meeting, "Oh, you're the guy that makes that kindergarten art with the letters." And I thought . . .

LS See now. See now.

GL If that is how he understands my work, I do not think that I should be aspiring to have a review by that person.

Glenn Ligon, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005
Neon and paint
4 × 48 inches | 10.2 × 121.9 cm; edition of 7 and 2 APs
Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.
© Glenn Ligon. Photo by Farzad Owrang

LS Not at all.

EO It seems like you only could operate with blind faith.

LS Blind faith, you've got to have it. [*Laughs.*]

GL There's nothing better.

LS No, but then you have the regret, right? If not, you can't operate like, "Oh, well, I'll do this thing that is mediating these other things because that seems to be the path," as opposed to, like, "Let me just do this shit that feels right." I mean, you can't be afraid of failure. But you can be afraid of regret.

EO How did you keep innovating despite those challenges?

LS For me, every show is luck. [*Laughs.*] I wish I had the arrogance to be like, "You know, that was easy. Yeah, that will be good. That shit is fab. I'm done." It's never that. It's always like, "Okay, that's what it is. See how that works?" I swear, every time.

GL Well, I think there's ambition around my work in terms of scale, which has to do with a certain kind of tenacity, because I physically make things. And so if the thing is forty-five feet long, it takes grit to finish it. When I was younger, I was more like Lorna, especially with the first neon I made for a show. I didn't see it until I got to the show and it was installed. And I was like, "Oh, not bad." And that was the neon, *Warm Broad Glow* (2005), that referenced Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*. [*Laughs.*]

LS Okay, ignore everything he just said before that.

GL But I feel like the older I am, I want to get back to that headspace because there is so much more pressure now. It's especially difficult working with institutions because almost immediately you know that things are going to be a problem, and it gets into your head. I want to get back to the place where I'm just like, "No, I'm going to make this thing, and make them deal with the thing I made," rather than make the thing they desire.

EO You've both been making work for over thirty years now.

GL I don't think it gets easier, though? Does it?

LS No. Oh, fuck no. Not really. It doesn't get easier. Are you kidding? I wish the show I just did was easy. That was so fucking hard. And when I say hard, I just mean for that show I couldn't really imagine what I was trying to do. And I had to do it and kind of go, "Okay, it's not that. Okay, let's try that." It was very strange.

GL But, to your point, you have thirty years of doing that. Even though you're working on the edge there, you've been there before, and you trust your process and the integrity of your work enough to know, like, "Oh, this isn't working. Let me try this." You know, as opposed to, like, "Oh, this should look great." And then it doesn't. [*Laughs.*] It's a difficult balance to strike.

EO When you were both thirty, Glenn you had just been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and Lorna you were in the Venice Biennale. I'm curious what it felt like staying focused while navigating the business side of things?

LS Yeah, you have to put that aside.

GL No, really.

EO I'm also thinking about how we're only encountering the effects of cultural production in the 1990s now, in the 2020s, especially with the policies put in place from the Clinton administration years, O. J. Simpson, and Anita Hill. That was such a huge moment of cultural indexing.

LS And Rodney King. I wish we could go back in time, or that Julius was more part of our millennium. Because a lot of the bullshit that I read that he faced, we faced. The world didn't change that much in between those intervening years. But through this idea that you would have the audacity to just go, "Fuck it, I'm going to make what I want. I'm just going to do this shit." And because someone doesn't understand it yet, trust that's of no consequence. You can't be in the business of convincing everyone and be firmly in agreement. And we realized early on that no one was going to make room for you, you had to make room for yourself. And I don't mean in a kind of isolated way, I mean in terms of your ideas and how you were going to execute and get them done. You just had to do it. You couldn't wait for approval or a review to validate your approach, method, and experience.

EO You're both also now in your sixties, when Julius passed just shy of turning fifty years old.

GL Yeah, but the world hasn't changed all that much.

LS What I sense from Julius's work is isolation, but what often escapes is the humor of his titling. There's a beauty and intensity to the music, it has classical implications yet it moves into the

spaces of a requiem or aria. And he's going, "Nigger this, nigger that." He's pulling at all these stereotypes and gesturing at what people deem appropriateness. As if they were asking him, "Can you just be an appropriate gay black man?" I think there was a demand. "Can you diminish the gay part? Can you diminish the black part?" And instead he's like, "Now I'm going to be a nigger in your face."

GL Yeah, gay to the fullest. Black to the fullest.

LS Oh my God. And I get where that instinct comes from.

EO Are you thinking about the politics of language around your work with titles?

LS Of course.

GL Yeah, but I think our titles are not like Eastman's, because they're not provocations in the same way. He's traversing language and employing it musically. He's shining a light on what it can't hold—

LS And thinking about what's occupying the perimeter?

GL Right, right, right. And bringing that perimeter into the mainstream to the center of his practice. This conversation reminds me of similar ones I was having in my thirties. The biggest thing I'd made was a piece called *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* (1991–93), which was an investigation of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs. Because I was in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, and I chose to present annotations for his photographs in the '93 Biennial, people thought I had lost my mind, because they knew me to be a painter. They felt I was throwing my career away . . .

Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (detail), 1991–93
91 offset prints, 78 text pages
Each framed: Prints 11 1/2 × 11 1/2 inches | 29.2 × 29.2 cm;
text pages 5 1/4 × 7 1/4 inches | 13.3 × 18.4 cm
Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.
© Glenn Ligon. Photo by Ronald Amstutz

LS Your potential.

GL Yeah. "Why are you doing this? There's a trajectory for a painting practice you should follow."

LS And also, "How dare you?"

GL It was really important for me to realize, like, "Oh, I'm not just a painter." There are other things I'm interested in, and the space of painting can't hold that interest. And so I gave myself permission to go into this other space that's photo- and text-based. Thank you, Lorna. [*Laughs.*]

LS You have to give each other space. "Can I be annoyed?" [*Laughs.*]

GL Yes, we have this check-in, where when somebody says or does something, we call each other and we start with, "Can I be annoyed?"

LS "Can I be petty?" So it's the opener of, like, "Okay, I'm going to talk about some shit that's getting on my nerves that I know shouldn't. That I should just dismiss. But it's annoying. Here it is."

GL Oh, I don't know that one. Well, that's good. A "can I be annoyed" situation is a curator recently saying to me, "I am doing a show on text. What work of yours should I put in it?" What I'm also telling you is that it never ends. Never ends. Never ends. Never ends.

LS It never fucking ends.

GL Yeah, and advice to young artists, too. You've got to be assertive at the beginning of your career, because if you're too nice people will do whatever they want and take advantage of you. Be tough first and nice later.

EO It just seems exhaustive to have to be self-possessed, maintain clarity, while continuously walking the work to the conceptual and proverbial finish line, all while advocating for yourself in addition to that.

LS I don't think we know any other way to be.

GL Yeah, but also I think we have role models for that. Like Toni Morrison saying—

LS My kid is throwing up on my shirt, and I just move the vomit off of the paper and I keep writing. I think that's mixing the metaphor. But still, you get the point. You just keep doing it.

GL She never had ideal circumstances, but she still made masterpieces. And so that's a model for working. Morrison also said that white supremacy is meant to be distracting, keeping you preoccupied with bullshit from the work you need to do. David Hammons is a prime example, when the institutions come asking him to produce a particular kind of work, he'll stop making it.

EO Did you ever have to mask or hide parts of yourself?

LS I think for me, walking in rooms in the 1990s, going to art world dinners and openings, there were maybe a handful of black people around. I was always questioned, especially at dinners, "Who are you here with?" "I'm here by myself." So my presence was always questioned or not acknowledged, and it took me a while to be tough, even though I always knew I deserved to take up that space.

EO Are we standing in a different moment?

GL I think culture has told us we're in a moment of incredible change, retrenchment, and pulling back. There are things that can't be undone by the far right in this country, but they're going to try their hardest. And all these corporations are deciding to end their DEI initiatives because it's not good for the bottom line under this new regime. It's a strange time, but we have to be more intentional and remain focused.

LS No, I am apprehensive. I mean, you know, another round of white supremacist politics fighting fiercely in light of its inevitable end. The thing is that we know this, but there's nothing new that's going to happen next. So it isn't like I'm bracing myself, like, "Oh my God," now it's like, "We know what this is going to be. We know how to work with this." And if you look at it like, "Okay, so we've got to work through these four years." That's it. Like, take it four years at a time.

EO How does this vary from the Clinton years?

LS I think we were equipped differently in terms of having other people from our own generation who are writers and art historians. Maybe I am wrong about that, but the support of that network felt very strong and effective and we believed in each other's promise. I think we have that same agenda too, in terms of just being strategic. Like you said, Glenn, with your invitation to Saidiya Hartman, for her to write for your book. What really matters is to think, "What can I get done right now that can live in the world? Outside of the show, what can I do?" That writing is a document that attests to my thinking or my way of seeing. And the people that I invite can interrogate and play around with it, and have their own ideas as well. But I always bring it back to this thinking, because everything else is ephemeral, reviews certainly are. For the record, I'm just saying this because I don't think other artists had as much access as we had to that possibility.

GL Yeah, it's also why I recently published a book of writings and interviews, *Distinguishing Piss from Rain* (2024). I wanted to create my own discourse and show that artists aren't always waiting for writers to consider their work. I wanted the book to be a template and primer for younger artists, like, "Look, you can do this." It's me saying, "I hope the lessons in this book help you get where you need to go."

Julius Eastman, 1940–1990