

Afterword: Not Now (1994/2005)

“Art history and art criticism are often distinguished on the grounds that one treats the art of the past, distanced in time from its subject, and the other deals with recent art or with older art from the vantage point of contemporary experience”:¹ so, very sensibly, notes the art critic Irving Sandler. The peculiar hybrid that is contemporary art history, however, exists in the space between criticism and scholarship, between contemporary art and history. That space is necessarily unstable because the current moment keeps hurtling forward and the historical past likewise refuses to sit still for very long. This book has asked readers to consider contemporary art as a category that extends beyond—as well as before—the most recent biennial, issue of *Artforum*, international art fair, and emerging art star.

It takes about a year for a university press book to appear once the final manuscript has been submitted by the author. Given this, when writing *What Was Contemporary Art?* I knew that it would be at least twelve months out of date by the time it was published. Rather than regretting this delay, I have come to view it as a metaphor for the necessity of falling behind the times, for the importance of losing step with the ever-advancing march and marketing of contemporary art. By one recent accounting, there are now more than one hundred biennial exhibitions of contemporary art across the globe, from São Paulo to Seoul to Sharjah, with “almost one every ten days, on average.”² The art market has never been more genuinely global, or more massively capitalized, than it is today. In researching this book, I attended versions of the Venice Biennale, the Whitney Biennial, the Athens Biennial, Documenta, and Art

Basel Miami, as well as various satellite events and expositions, including the 2007 “Art Now” Fair in Miami Beach. It soon became clear to me that trying to keep up with the pace of the contemporary art world was a practical impossibility, not least because I lacked the financial resources to do so. Archival research, critical thinking, the crafting of book-length chapters—these tasks do not lend themselves to the tempo or logic of “art now.” In writing contemporary art history, it may therefore be necessary, paradoxically, to lag behind the time of the contemporary art world, behind the latest biennial opening, artist’s project, or blog posting.

In approaching the contemporary as a historical phenomenon, I follow the example of my life partner, the performance scholar and theater historian David Román. In *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*, Román observes that “critical efforts to theorize the contemporary are often accused of being ‘presentist’: a focus on the contemporary is presumed to come at the expense of history, as if the contemporary could only be understood as antagonistic to the past, or in a mutually exclusive relationship to it.”³ His 2005 book challenges this presumption by showing that “contemporary performance is itself already embedded in a historical archive of past performances that help contextualize the work in history. In this way, the contemporary participates in an ongoing dialogue with previously contemporary works now relegated to literary history, the theatrical past, or cultural memory.”⁴ *Performance in America* demonstrates how works of U.S. theater and performance from 1994 to 2004 revived a wide-ranging archive of British and American culture from the eighteenth through the mid twentieth centuries. Rather than trying to keep up with the ever-quickenning pace of the contemporary, Román looked back through recent works to find a wealth of prior performances—from nineteenth-century saloon songs to golden-era Broadway musicals—embedded within them. In so doing, he revealed how a performance could be both contemporary and historical, both thoroughly up-to-date and deeply archival.

What Was Contemporary Art? has likewise sought to demonstrate the dialectical relationship of (once) current cultural production to the historical past. To do so, it has focused on visual art and its reproduction in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. By way of conclusion, I want to step nearer to the present while still resisting the pressure of “art now.”

I turn first to an artist’s interview published in 1994, then to an art opening in 2005. In both cases, the event at issue triggers associations with other moments that unsettle the relation between contemporary art and history. In both instances, the past is reworked and challenged by what was then the current moment.

Warhol’s Rhinestones (1994)

In 1994, the journal *October* published an interview with Andy Warhol conducted in 1985 by the art historian and critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. Throughout much of the interview, Buchloh is concerned with questions of artistic influence, with which art and artists mattered to Warhol when.⁵ The following exchange is typical:

Buchloh: People have speculated about the origins of your early linear drawing style, whether it comes more out of Matisse, or had been influenced by Cocteau, or came right out of Ben Shahn. I was always surprised that they never really looked at Man Ray, for example, or Picabia. Were they a factor in your drawings of the late 1950s, or did you think of your work at that time as totally commercial?

Warhol: Yeah, it was just commercial art.

At several other points in the conversation, Warhol similarly rejects Buchloh’s attempts to create a modernist pedigree for his art. When asked about the impact of meeting Marcel Duchamp in the 1960s, Warhol states,

“No, I didn’t know him that well.”⁷ And, in a moment of terrifically unambiguous rejection, the artist responds to a question about the influence of Francis Picabia on his commercial drawings of the 1950s by saying, “I didn’t even know who that person was” at the time.⁸ Throughout the conversation, the famously impassive artist offers variations on his preferred response (“I don’t know”) to questions.⁶

The interview bespeaks the desire of the art historian to locate the artist within a genealogical schema of influence and innovation. The artist, however, will not play along. After Warhol has disclaimed Man Ray as an influence on his commercial art of the 1950s, Buchloh asks, “And you would not have been aware of Man Ray’s drawings until the sixties?” Warhol responds, “Well, when I did know Man Ray he was just a photographer. I guess I still don’t know the drawings really.”⁹ Not only does Warhol disclaim the knowledge about which Buchloh inquires but he also denies that knowledge in the present (1985) moment of the interview. By admitting that he (still) does not know Man Ray’s drawings, Warhol precludes the possibility of identifying that body of work as a source for his own.

Warhol’s criteria for judging art cannot be made to conform to Buchloh’s, much to the latter’s consternation. Throughout the interview, Buchloh invites Warhol to comment negatively on (then) current forms of neoexpressionist painting, which the critic feels have failed to heed the lessons of pop and minimalism:

Buchloh: So the shift that has occurred in the last five years has not at all bothered you? The return to figuration, the return to manual painting procedures—that’s nothing that you see in conflict with your own work and its history?

Warhol: No, because I’m doing the same.¹⁰

Rather than seeing recent tendencies in contemporary art as contradicting his earlier work, Warhol blithely admits to practicing those same tendencies.¹¹ Far from judging the return to figuration or to painting by hand as regressive, the artist acknowledges that return within his own practice. By insisting that “I’m doing the same,” he refuses the vanguardist logic proposed by Buchloh in favor of a model of repetition without conflict.

Toward the end of the interview, Warhol turns away from discussing art entirely to describe something he witnessed earlier that same day: “I don’t know, this morning I went to the handbag district, and there were people that spend all day just putting in rhinestones with their hands, which is just amazing, that they do everything by hand. It would be different if some machine did it and . . .”¹² In a neat reversal of his oft-cited desire to be a machine, Warhol here finds himself fascinated by a labor of decoration that cannot be fully mechanized. Rather than rejecting “manual painting procedures” in the manner that Buchloh anticipates, Warhol directs the conversation to an unexpected time and place—this morning in the handbag district.

Earlier in the interview, the artist rejected an avant-garde lineage for his 1950s drawings and identified them instead as “just commercial art.” Much of the appeal of Warhol’s early commercial imagery lay, paradoxically, in its noncommercial, hand-wrought appearance and ornamental wit. Though he may not have attached rhinestones to actual handbags, Warhol did draw and trace rhinestones, beads, buckles, and gilt clasps in illustrations of ladies’ handbags, shoes, belts, and other accessories for fashion advertisements and newspaper articles throughout the 1950s. In 1985, his mention of what he saw that morning not only marks a rejection of the model of avant-garde innovation and failure proposed by Buchloh; it also recalls the commercial imagery and materials with which the first decade of Warhol’s career was largely concerned. The artist’s mention of rhinestones on handbags reiterates

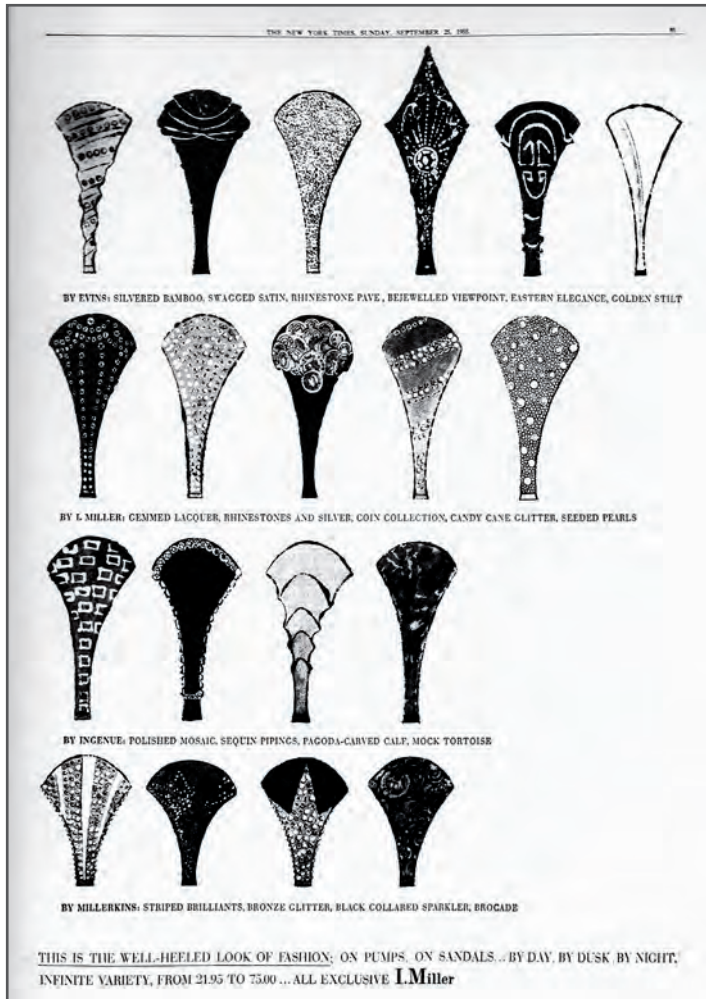
his refusal to affiliate his 1950s drawings with Buchloh's pantheon of artists (Henri Matisse, Jean Cocteau, Man Ray, Ben Shahn, Duchamp, Picabia) and inscribes that work within a quite different order of manual labor and design. Warhol falls out of line—and out of time—with art history as a series of proper names and punctual movements.

Just after his mention of rhinestones, Warhol's voice trails off. As though recognizing the need to return to a discourse of the contemporary art world, he then asks Buchloh, "Have you been going to galleries and seeing all the new things?" Buchloh responds, "Yes, I go fairly consistently, and I never really quite understood why everything has been turned around in that way, why all of a sudden people start looking at painting again as if certain things never happened."¹³ Here, Buchloh refers again to neo-expressionist painting, which he sees as outmoded and redundant in its insistence on painterly authenticity. But Warhol does not understand redundancy or outmodedness as a problem. In explaining this to Buchloh, Warhol again turns away from the art world and toward a quite different example:

It's like in the sixties when we met our first drag queens, and they thought they were the first to do it. Now I go to a party and these little kids have become drag queens, the younger people now being drag queens. They think they are the only people who ever thought of being a drag queen, which is sort of weird. It's like they invented it, and it's all new again and stuff, so it makes it really interesting.¹⁴

Warhol sees the claims of "younger people now" to have "invented" drag as "really interesting." Instead of a model of heroic innovation in which each generation must create something radically different from the last, he proposes repetition as renewal in the sense of making newly relevant.

Warhol all but tells Buchloh to look beyond the paradigm of individual artistic achievement and influence if he wishes to understand his work. When



5.1 Andy Warhol's ad for I. Miller Shoes.
New York Times, September 25, 1955.
 (Courtesy The Archives of the Andy Warhol
 Museum, Pittsburgh. Founding Collection.)
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 Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

the critic asks, for example, whether the accumulations of the French artist Arman inspired the serial nature of Warhol's pop silkscreens in the early 1960s, the artist's response is unequivocal: "No, well, I didn't think that way. I didn't. I wasn't thinking of anything. I was looking for a thing."¹⁵ Throughout the interview, Warhol steps outside the canonical timeline proposed by Buchloh and into the time "when we met our first drag queens" and the time "this morning [when] I went to the handbag district." By situating art alongside other things and people in the social and material world, Warhol eludes art-historical periodization. Rather than fixing his art within a definitive sequence of sources and influences, Warhol opts for multiple times and places. Like the rhinestones he saw "this morning" that simultaneously recalled his commercial drawings from thirty years earlier, Warhol's present moment returns to and reformulates the past rather than transcending it.

At the very start of the interview, Buchloh explains to Warhol that "I am currently doing research on the reception of Dada and Duchamp's work in the late 1950s and I would like to go a bit into that history if you don't mind."¹⁶ For Warhol, however, the reception of art, whether Duchamp's or his own, could not be slotted into a stable time frame. It kept seeping out into other times and places. In the final section of this book, I consider how we might bring a similar sense of untimeliness to viewing—and writing about—contemporary art.

Ligon's Light (2005)

I've just arrived in Toronto and am already running late. My taxi driver isn't familiar with the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, the art space I need to get to. But he does know Harbourfront Centre, the cultural complex of which the Power Plant is part. He drops me off beside an expanse of shops and high-rise condominiums and I run into the building that looks the most like a renovated factory. I am here for the opening of the survey exhibit *Glenn*

Ligon: Some Changes—but virtually no one else seems to be. The place is nearly deserted. I look over to the gallery assistant at the front desk, who says, “They’re all out on the deck.” After convincing her to stash my luggage behind the desk, I walk quickly through the galleries and out the back of the building. I enter a roped-off deck with a long bar, a table of hors d’oeuvres, and a sunny view of Lake Ontario. Two hundred or so people are listening to a speech by one of the two curators of the show. I don’t see the artist or, for that matter, anyone I recognize among the crowd of attentive Canadians. As the curator acknowledges the various individuals and foundations that have supported the show, I decide to slip back inside the galleries. I figure I have at least ten minutes before the thank-yous end and the crowd disperses.

It takes a moment to adjust to the modified light of the galleries, and I turn to my right and enter a room that has only one work in it. It is a neon sculpture (the first, to my knowledge, of Ligon’s career). In typewriter-like text, it spells out the words “negro sunshine.” No caps, no quotes, just the two words illuminating the otherwise shadowy room with their slightly humming, off-white light. Outside, I think to myself, on that roped-off deck is the space of the contemporary art world, of collectors, curators, and gallerists socializing in the sun. Inside is Glenn Ligon’s light—soft wattage, high impact, entirely unexpected yet exquisitely plugged in to both the historical past and the present. I spend the next fifteen minutes in this light, leaving only when some (other) white people begin streaming in from the reception outside.¹⁷

You have just read a portion of present-tense art criticism from the past. Occasioned by the June 2005 opening of a major exhibition by an artist I have long admired, the piece was published in the May 2006 issue of *Artforum*. Though already eleven months out of date by the time it was published, the piece began *in medias res* to give a sense of the ever-quickening pace of the contemporary art world and the challenge of keeping up with its accelerated tempo.¹⁸

Warm Broad Glow gave me permission to fall out of step with the social world of the opening in Toronto. Or rather, Ligon's artwork offered me entry into a different kind of opening—an imaginative and aesthetic opening onto the past rather than an opportunity for professional schmoozing and the exchange of hugs and business cards.¹⁹

Warm Broad Glow was the last work, chronologically speaking, included in *Some Changes*, and it was not reproduced or discussed in the exhibition catalogue. Almost nothing, in fact, had yet been written about the piece when I saw it in Toronto. I hesitated at the time to break the silence on it, even as, of course, I knew that the work would be widely written about and reproduced, given Ligon's stature as a contemporary artist. If wordlessness seemed an appropriate response to *Warm Broad Glow*, it was because the sculpture could not be made to mean something definitive about race or language, about the backlash against identity politics, or about the legacy of neon art in the wake of Mario Merz and Bruce Nauman. That the sculpture did not resolve into a stable meaning or message was not, however, to say that it lacked content. To the contrary, the oblique address of *Warm Broad Glow* was part of its content. The sculpture's material form—shaped glass tubes, black industrial paint, electrical cords and outlets, pulsating neon light—generated the “ne-gro sunshine” that the work simultaneously named. *Warm Broad Glow* introduced a vernacular remnant from the segregationist past to a modern form of commercial signage and, in so doing, suspended the syntax of race in the light of anachronism.

Though often tethered by critics and curators to the concept of identity politics, Ligon's art has never been about the simple affirmation of identity (racial or otherwise) or about the positing of any “correct” form of racial politics. Take *Cocaine (Pimps)* (1993), one of the joke paintings the artist executed



5.2 Glenn Ligon, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005.
Neon and paint, 36 × 192 inches (91.4 × 487.7
cm), edition of 7, AP 1/2. (Courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles.) © Glenn Ligon.



5.3 *Artforum* cover, May 2006. © Artforum.

in the early 1990s (the boom years of multiculturalism). The text of the painting, transcribed from a late 1970s LP of stand-up routine by Richard Pryor, reads:

Niggers be holding them dicks too . . .
 White people go “Why you guys hold
 your things?”
 Say “You done took everything else
 motherfucker.”

As painted by Ligon, the raw language and syntax of the joke contribute to a broader sense of impropriety. For starters, the joke was meant to be heard rather than read, listened to rather than looked at. Its humor flows in part from the cadence and logic of Pryor’s delivery. Reconstituted as a text painting, the joke is distanced, though not entirely dissociated, from Pryor’s voice. It is now the viewer who mouths these words, whether silently or aloud, and thereby speaks the rage barely veiled beneath their humor. The visual form of *Cocaine (Pimps)*—the tiny flecks of paint jumping off the letters, the (off-) color combination of orange against red—changes and recharges its language. A raunchy joke from an old Richard Pryor album becomes, in Ligon’s hands, an intricately painted surface of stencils, strokes, and smudges, a microworld of colored incident and inscription. The picture pays respect to the beauty of Pryor’s obscenity.

Some Changes traced a recursive path, rather than a linear plot, through two decades of Ligon’s career. Early projects and artistic concerns resurfaced through the lens of later experiences and creative commitments. The Pryor pictures provide a case in point. Having launched the series in 1993, Ligon abandoned it after just four canvases. According to the artist, the paintings “felt very raw to me. . . . Pryor’s jokes are quite scatological and racially charged so in order to use those texts I had to inhabit them in a way that was

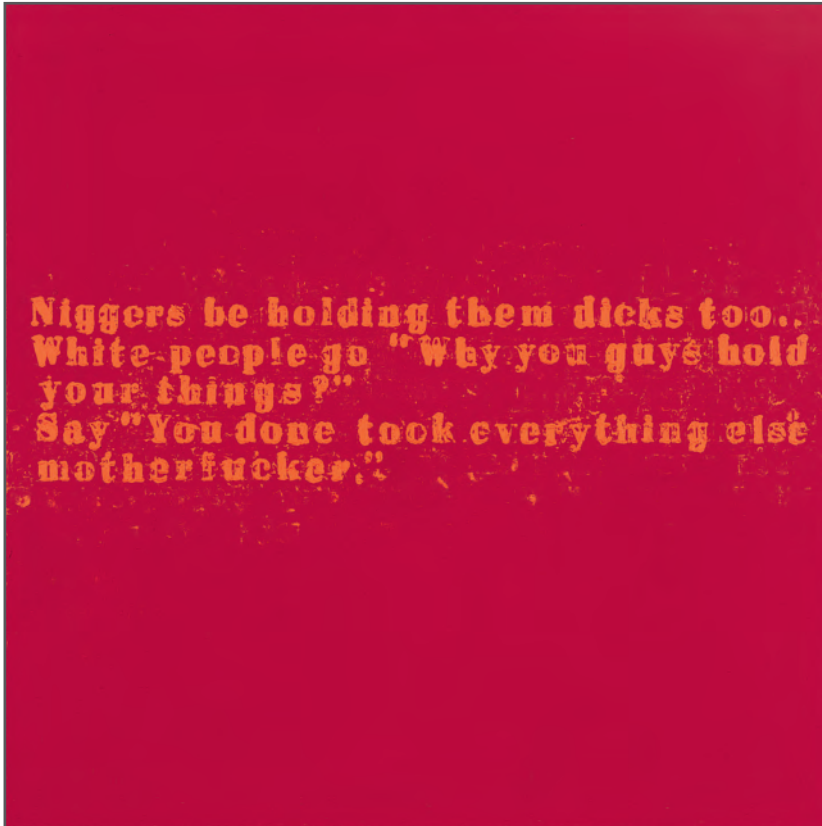
frightening to me but also was the very power of those texts. . . . Basically, I got too scared to keep going with them.”²⁰ In 2004, however, Ligon returned to Pryor’s jokes and began to make additional text paintings. While similar in size to their predecessors and using the same square format, the later canvases feature a keyed-up, tartly Warholian palette and a multiplication of color contrasts. In *Especially If It’s a Girl #1*, for example, the hot-pink text of a sex joke delivers an unexpectedly yellow punch line, while in *Mudbone (Liar) #3*, a purple passage on “the biggest dicks in the world” gives way to a long electric-blue conclusion.

In an essay written while he was working on this series, Ligon asks,

So why have I returned to Pryor after all these years? Perhaps it is that Pryor is funny again. Not that he wasn’t funny back in the seventies, it’s just that all his militancy, his rage at social and economic injustice, his breaking down of sexual taboos seems amusing now, almost quaint. The jokes don’t scare me anymore because the world they promised to bring seems even farther away than it did then. As Pryor says, “Remember the Revolution brother? It’s over. Lasted six months.” When I listen to Pryor records now, I laugh and am a little sad—nostalgic for my fear, I guess.²¹

Even as Ligon resumed work on his Pryor paintings, the jokes that were his source recalled a moment of black militancy and promised revolution receding ever further into the past. Pryor’s death in 2005 can only have widened the distance between his jokes and Ligon’s visual transcription of them.

Ligon’s dialectical engagement with history is nowhere more intense than in his practice of self-portraiture. In the 1993 companion series of prints *Runaways* and *Narratives*, the artist speaks (or, rather, is spoken for) in the voice of the slave. In the latter series, Ligon mimics the rhetoric and typography of nineteenth-century slave narratives while replacing the details of the text with information drawn from his own biography:



5.4 Glenn Ligon, *Cocaine (Pimps)*, 1993.
Oilstick, synthetic polymer, and graphite
on linen, 32 × 32 inches (81.3 × 81.3 cm).
(Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.)
© Glenn Ligon.



5.5 Glenn Ligon, *Mudbone Liar (#3)*, 2004.
Oilstick and acrylic on canvas, 32 × 32 inches
(81.3 × 81.3 cm). (Courtesy Regen Projects,
Los Angeles.) © Glenn Ligon.

The
Life and Adventures
of
Glenn Ligon
A Negro;

Who was sent to be educated amongst white people in the year 1966 when only about six years of age and has continued to fraternize with them to the present time.

By using the antiquated diction, style, and syntax of antebellum handbills and title pages to describe his own late-twentieth-century experience, the artist draws out the latent effects of history on the current moment, including (the current moment here being 1993) the art world's qualified embrace of multiculturalism:

Black Rage;
or,
How I Got Over
or
Sketches
of the
Life and Labors
of
Glenn Ligon

Containing a full and faithful account of his commodification of the horrors of black life into art objects for the public's enjoyment.

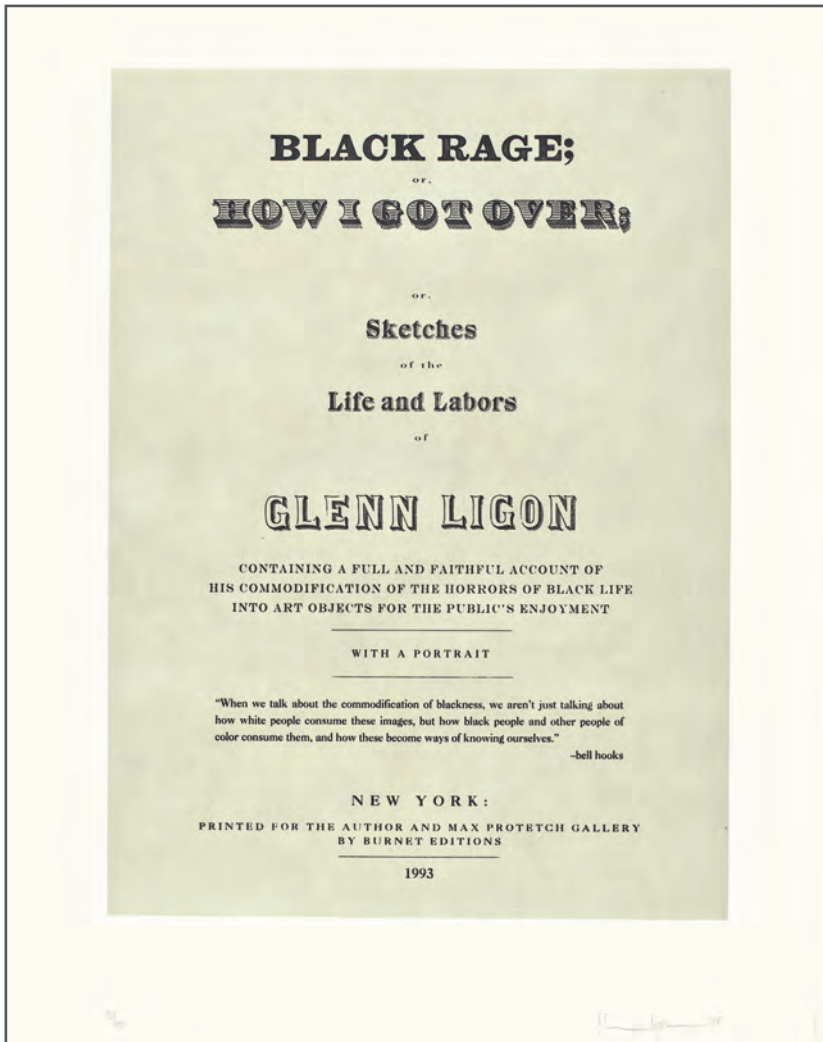
Or, to cite another print from the same series,

The
Narrative

of the
 Life and Uncommon Sufferings
 of
 Glenn Ligon,
 A Colored Man,
 Who at a tender age discovered his affection for the bodies of other men,
 and has endured scorn and tribulations ever since.
 Written by himself.

Rather than situate the slave narrative securely in the past, Ligon insists on the continuing relevance of that narrative to contemporary black life, including, and especially, his own. The printed proliferation and stylistic back-dating of the character “Glenn Ligon” opens a space, at once critical and creative, for the artist to comment on various aspects of his personal and professional experience. Using the language of anachronism, Ligon remembers—but also sends up—his grade-school education among predominantly white students, his participation in the artistic commodification of black abjection, and the unsettling discovery (“at a tender age”) of his contraband desires for other men. This last print deftly registers the queer force of sexuality as it brushes up against secrecy and stigma.

At the time of *Some Changes*, the current moment in contemporary African-American art was often referred to as “post-black,” a term introduced by Thelma Golden in the context of *Freestyle*, an exhibit she curated in 2001 at the Studio Museum in Harlem.²² As framed by Golden, the concept of post-black was intentionally double-edged, insofar as it referred to “artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”²³ For Golden, “post-black” named the push/pull effect of a



5.6 Glenn Ligon, *Narratives* (detail), 1993.
Suite of nine photo etchings on chine collé,
approx. 28 × 21 inches (71.1 × 53.3 cm) each.
(Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.)
© Glenn Ligon.

racial designation that could be neither comfortably claimed nor completely disowned.

In the immediate wake of *Freestyle*, the term created something of a minor media sensation. *Time* magazine, for example, (punningly) declared a “golden age for post-black art” with Golden as its “major cheerleader.” *Time*’s embrace of “post-black” was based in part on a blandly affirmative reading of the term as referencing “work by a generation whose approach to issues of racial identity has been liberated and informed by America’s growing multicultural fabric.”²⁴ Rather than situating post-black within a long and contested history of racial designation, *Time* presented it as a form of feel-good, multicultural liberation.

Warm Broad Glow registered a protest against such reductive formulations of post-black as expressed in *Time*. It did so by going back “before ‘black’” to the lexical and historical moment of “negro” and back even further to the stereotype of shiny black servility and sunny obedience. Most specifically, *Warm Broad Glow* returned to Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha: Each One as She May,” first published in 1909. On the opening page of the novella, Stein describes Rose Johnson, a friend of the mixed-race protagonist, in the following terms:

Rose Johnson was a real black negress but she had been brought up quite like their own child by white folks.

Rose laughed when she was happy but she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine. Rose was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes. Hers was just ordinary, any sort of woman laughter.²⁵

Rose is contrasted against, rather than characterized by, the “warm broad glow of negro sunshine.” Although genuinely black in parentage (“a real black

negress”), Rose was raised “by white folks” and is, presumably for this reason, devoid of the “boundless joy of negroes.” In such passages, Stein traffics in the most extreme of racial stereotypes. But she also scrambles the logic of those stereotypes by suggesting they are “earth-born” rather than “inborn,” the product of social and domestic life rather than of blood or nature.

Many viewers of *Warm Broad Glow* (myself included) may not have recognized “negro sunshine” as a citation from Stein. This would not, I imagine, disturb Ligon very much. In declining to make the connection explicit, Ligon unbinds the sculpture from Stein and her place in the American literary canon. To view *Warm Broad Glow* is to confront instead the wider force of a past that has not passed away. Throughout his career, Ligon has traced the movement of language across multiple registers and contexts, from vernacular speech to printed texts, from common usage to obsolescence, from popular culture to literature to visual art and back again. *Warm Broad Glow* reaches back across a century of history, fiction, and stereotype to address a postmillennial audience that is supposedly beyond or “over” race.

According to Golden, “post-black” started as an irreverent comment, even a kind of joke, that she exchanged with Ligon. As she notes in the *Free-style* catalogue:

A few years ago, my friend, the artist Glenn Ligon, and I began using the term “post-black.” Our relationship is grounded in a shared love of absurd uses of language, and our conversations, both serious and silly, are always full of made-up and misused words and phrases. “Post-black” was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. . . . Glenn was better at identifying the traces and instances of it than I was, but the moment he said it, I knew exactly what he meant.²⁶

Even as she introduces “post-black” into critical discourse, Golden locates it as private slang that cannot be fully calibrated or codified, a shorthand best apprehended in “traces and instances.” It makes sense that Ligon should have shared that shorthand with Golden long before its presentation as a curatorial concept in *Freestyle* or its appearance in the pages of *Time* magazine. Ligon has always gravitated toward vernacular speech acts that trouble the protocols of proper usage (“you done took everything else / motherfucker”) and to forms of language that have become antiquated to the point where they may now be renewed and recharged (“negro sunshine”).

When I first saw *Warm Broad Glow*, I sensed but could not specify a slight indirection in the light cast by the sculpture. I later learned that Ligon had applied an industrial rubber-coating compound called Plasti Dip to the face of the sign. The Plasti Dip serves a double purpose: it traces the phrase “negro sunshine” in black and it blocks the emanation of neon from the front of the sign. These two functions were in fact one and the same. By partially obstructing the off-white light, the Plasti Dip created a halo effect that heightened—which is to say, softened—the visual drama of *Warm Broad Glow*. The viewing of a work such as *Warm Broad Glow* takes time. But it also makes time by clearing a space for other moments and associations to register in the living present.

The argument of this book has been that contemporary art is not simply a function of the current moment or the immediate past. Contemporary art is also a relation between an ever-shifting present and the volatile force of history. I have used the examples of Alfred Barr teaching contemporary art at Wellesley College in 1927, exhibitions of premodern art at MoMA in the 1930s and early 1940s, and the controversy over the naming of the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1948 to argue for a history of contemporary art. But many other examples could also be adduced to counter the present-ism of today’s

art world. Those examples would draw upon different institutional narratives, national contexts, and visual objects from those on which I have focused.

In 2012, as this book goes to print, the culture of contemporary art seems to be burning more intensely than ever. But the glare of now-ism—of the latest international art fair, *e-flux* posting, hot young artist, and auction-house record—can be fairly blinding. The spectacular immediacy of the contemporary art world threatens to overwhelm our ability to think critically about the relation of the current moment to the past.

By dimming the lights a bit, artworks such as *Warm Broad Glow* invite us to slow down, take a deep breath, and consider histories prior to our own. Should we accept the invitation, we will find ourselves envisioning a different place and time.

Not here. And not now.