

Meyer, Richard. "Light it up, or How Glenn Ligon Got Over." *Artforum* 44, no. 9 (May 2006): 240–47.



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 refashioned 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 bag 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 ten minutes in this light, only leaving when some (other) white people begin streaming in from the reception outside.

The neon sculpture, titled *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, is the last work, chronologically speaking, in "Some Changes" and is not discussed in the exhibition catalogue. Almost nothing, in fact, has yet been written about the piece, and I hesitate to break the silence on it, even as, of course, I already have. If wordlessness seems an appropriate response to *Warm Broad Glow*, it is because the sculpture cannot be made to mean something definitive about race or language, about the current backlash against identity politics, or about the legacy of neon art in the wake of Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman. That the sculpture does not resolve into a stable meaning or message is not, however, to say that it lacks content. To the contrary, the oblique address of *Warm Broad Glow* comprises part of its content. The sculpture's material form—shaped glass tubes, industrial black paint, electrical cords and outlets, pulsating neon light—generates the "negro sunshine" that the work simultaneously names. *Warm Broad Glow* introduces a remnant from the vernacular past to a commercial form of modern signage and, in doing so, recasts the logic of both contemporary art and race.

In April 2005, at roughly the same moment when Ligon was creating this sculpture, Holland Cotter wrote in the *New York Times* that "racial politics is 'out' at the moment in art. . . . 'Subversive' is the acceptable new term for 'political' and, of course, it can mean anything or nothing." The framing of racial politics as "out" implies a prior moment of fashionability when it was "in." Rather than an ongoing series of social conflicts and material inequities, "racial politics" is reduced to a passé style of '90s art, a period vestige of political correctness.

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 in the early 1990s (the boom years of multiculturalism). The text of the painting, transcribed from a late-'70s LP of stand-up routines 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."



## Light It Up, or How Glenn Ligon Got Over

RICHARD MEYER

**Niggers had the biggest dicks in the world and they was trying to find a place where they could have they contest. And they wasn't no freak they didn't want everybody looking. So they walking around looking for a secret place. So they walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and the nigger seen that water and and made him wanna piss. One said "Man, I got to take a leak." And he pulled his thing out and was pissing. Other nigger pulled out his thing, took a piss. One nigger said "Goddamn, this water cold!" The other nigger say "Yeah, and it's deep too!"**

This page: Glenn Ligon, *Mudbone (Liar) #3*, 2004, oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 32". Opposite page: View of "Glenn Ligon: Some Changes," Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 2005. From left: *Especially if It's a Girl*, 2004; *When Black Wasn't Beautiful #2*, 2004; *The Future #1*, 2004; *Niggers Ain't Scared #2*, 2005; *Mudbone (Liar) #3*, 2004.

Even as Ligon resumes work on his Richard Pryor paintings, the jokes that are his source recall 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.

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 must mouth these words, whether silently or aloud, and thereby speak the rage barely veiled beneath their humor. The visual form of *Cocaine (Pimps)*—the tiny flecks of orange paint jumping off the letters, the force of the work's (off-)color—changes and recharges its language. A raunchy joke from an old 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 its respects to the beauty of Pryor's obscenity.

"Some Changes," which opens in Pittsburgh at the Andy Warhol Museum in September, after being on view in Toronto last summer, traces a recursive path, rather than a linear plot, through the last two decades of Ligon's career. Early projects and artistic concerns resurface 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 but also was the very power of those texts. . . . Basically, I got too scared to keep going with them." In 2004, however, Ligon returned to Pryor's jokes and began to make additional text paintings. While similar in size to and using the same square format as their predecessors, the later canvases feature a keyed-up, tartly Warholian palette and a multiplication of color contrasts. In *Especially If It's a Girl #1*, 2004, for example, the hot-pink text of a sex joke delivers an unexpectedly yellow punch line, while in *Mudbone (Liar) #3*, 2004, a purple passage on "THE BIGGEST DICKS IN THE WORLD" gives way to a long, electric-blue conclusion. In an essay written while 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." Even as Ligon resumes work on his Richard Pryor paintings, the jokes that are his source recall 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.

**THE EARLIEST PAINTING** on display in "Some Changes" is *Untitled (I Am A Man)*, 1988. The painting cites the 1968 protest slogan of striking black sanitation

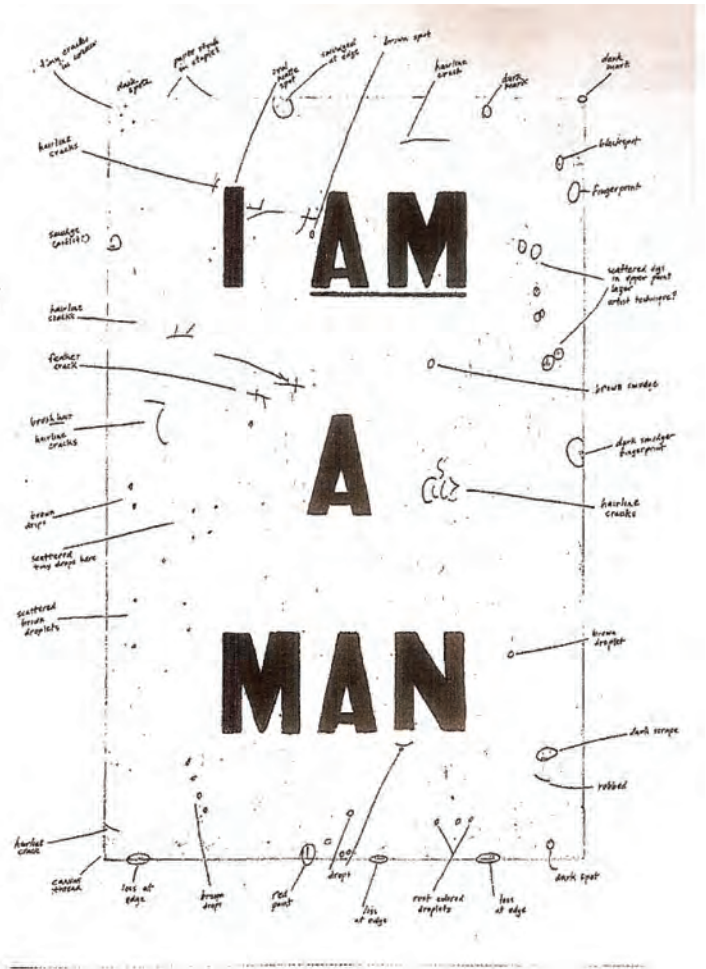
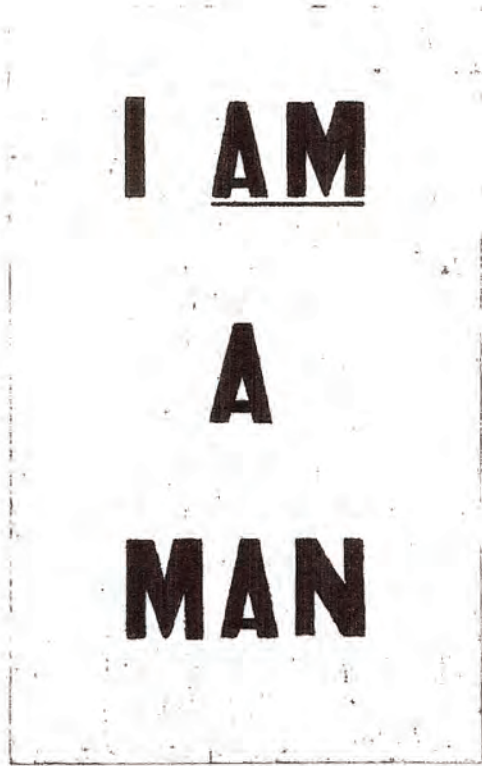


workers in Memphis, Tennessee. To rally support for the workers, Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to the city and delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. One day later, he was assassinated.

In "Some Changes," *Untitled (I Am A Man)* appeared first in the form of an oil-and-enamel painting and then (twice) in *Condition Report*, 2000, a silk-screen diptych printed more than a decade later. The diptych's left panel reproduces the painting while the right copies a condition report prepared, at the artist's request, by a friend and professional paintings conservator. While the scrapes, cracks, and losses detailed in *Condition Report* document the tiny imperfections and material vulnerability of *Untitled (I Am A Man)*, they may also allude, however indirectly, to the tenuous condition of black labor and civil rights in the decades since 1968 or to the fragile construction of a masculinity that needs always to reassert itself as such (I AM A MAN). It is characteristic of Ligon's working method that the material specificity of a single work of art—its "dark marks," "brown smudges," and "blackspots"—should provide a metaphor for the struggles of everyday life.

Even as I write those last two sentences, I know I've pushed *Condition Report* too far, made it signify too literally in relation to black history and masculinity. While deeply embedded in the historical past, Ligon's art never simply reports on it. Period sources and archival references are retrieved but also remade in works such as *Condition Report*, *Mudbone (Liar) #3*, and *Warm Broad Glow*. Ligon channels a past that is at once immediate and remote, lived and imagined, visible and evanescent. As a viewer (and critic) of his art, I want to allow for its shifting temporalities and multiple references rather than to fix them in place.

Although best known as a text painter, Ligon can hardly be confined to oil stick on canvas. As "Some Changes" amply demonstrates, his body of work extends across the practices of collage, photography, video, sculpture, wall drawing, printmaking, digital art, mixed-media installation, as well as various forms of artistic collaboration. Ligon has based an ongoing series of paintings, works on paper, and wall drawings of Malcolm X, for example, on black-history coloring books from the '70s. Rather than color in the pages of the books himself, the artist invited primary-school children to do so and then created paintings based on their color choices and handiwork. As those choices are transferred by Ligon from crayon to paint, from coloring book to canvas, and from child to adult, they necessarily take on new associations and effects. In the most startling composition, Malcolm X is made up (and over) with fuchsia lips,



This page: Glenn Ligon, *Condition Report*, 2000, diptych, silk screen on iris print, each 32 x 22 1/4". Opposite page, from left: Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Black Rage: or, How I Got Over)*, 1993, etching and chine collé on paper, each 28 x 21". From the suite *Narratives*, 1993. Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (The Life and Adventures of Glenn Ligon)*, 1993, etching and chine collé on paper, each 28 x 21". From the suite *Narratives*, 1993.

Using the language of anachronism, Ligon remembers—but also sends up—his grade-school education among 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.

the eye shadow, red beauty marks, and pale white skin. Rather than enacting a drag parody of black nationalism, the painting partakes in the pleasures and unpredictable inversions of color(ing) so as to reactivate the image of Malcolm X in a later historical moment.

Ligon’s dialectical engagement with history is nowhere more intense than in his practice of self-portraiture. In the companion series of prints “Runaways” and the suite *Narratives*, both 1993, 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:

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 (the current moment here being 1993), including 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 backdating 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.

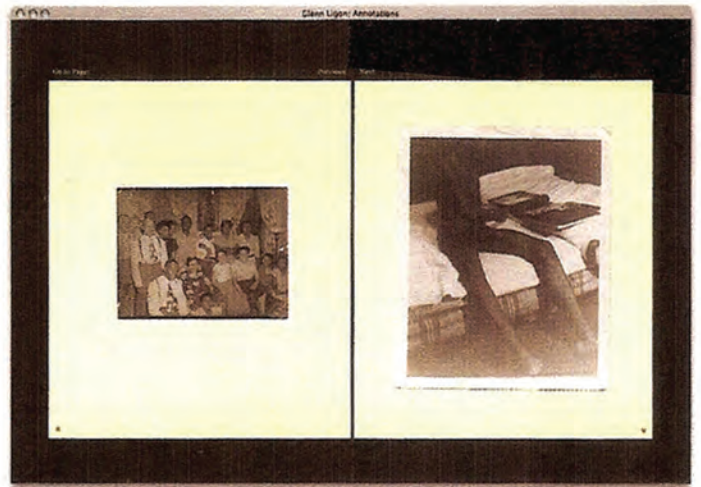
As Ligon’s work has increasingly turned to sexuality in relation to both race and language, photography has emerged as a central concern. While it may be overstating matters to say that sexuality summoned the photographic image into the artist’s creative practice, the structural link between the two has become increasingly apparent in Ligon’s work since the early 1990s. In *A Feast of Scraps*,



1994–1998, for example, the artist inserts vintage porn photographs of black men into scrapbooklike pages of old family snapshots, some of which depict the artist’s own family. Ligon captions the porn shots with cut-and-paste phrases that refer back to—but also radically rescript—the familial roles and relations on offer elsewhere in the work (MOTHER KNEW; DADDY; NECESSITY IS A MOTHER; BROTHER). In these pages, unbidden erotic fantasies and forbidden photographs take their place beside vacation snapshots, graduation pictures, wedding showers, birthday celebrations, and church baptisms. *A Feast of Scraps* renders visible that which must be kept hidden, left unspoken, or otherwise repressed within traditional records of domestic and familial life. The logic and layout of *Feast of Scraps* provides the basis for *Annotations*, 2003, a digital-art project in which a retro scrapbook of middle-class black family life gives way to a secret history of homoerotic photographs, private letters, and popular period songs.

If *Feast of Scraps* looks forward to *Annotations*, it also looks back to *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–93, an installation that itself returns to the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. In this work, Ligon juxtaposes framed pages from Mapplethorpe’s 1986 *Black Book* of male nudes with a wide range of textual commentaries, including those of artists, politicians, Christian commentators, queer theorists, and drag queens. Ligon multiplies voices within *Notes*, not in order to create a happy plurality of diverse perspectives, but to reveal how Mapplethorpe’s black male nudes function as a symbolic screen on which conflicting claims and irreconcilable associations—about race, desire, disease, art, and civil liberties—are registered.

Arguably Ligon’s best-known work outside his text paintings, *Notes* was not included in “Some Changes.” Its absence recalls an earlier, and necessarily marginalized, moment in Ligon’s encounter with *Black Book*. The artist initiated *Notes* by writing his responses to Mapplethorpe’s work directly on the pages of a personal copy of the book. One page from Ligon’s annotated book features Mapplethorpe’s head-and-shoulders portrait of a shirtless young black man. While the man’s body has been frontally posed, his head is turned in sharp profile so that his only means of returning the camera’s gaze is to look, quite literally, out of the corner of his eye. The studio lights play unevenly off the surface of the man’s skin such that certain features (the right ear, the bridge of the nose, the collarbone, a patch of forehead) are reflected while others are partially or wholly obscured. Just above and below the photographic image Ligon has written



This page, top: Glenn Ligon, *Annotations*, 2003, screen captures from [www.diacenter.org/ligon](http://www.diacenter.org/ligon). Bottom: Glenn Ligon, *A Feast of Scraps*, 1994–, photographs and text mounted on paper, each 11 1/2 x 20 1/2". Opposite page: Glenn Ligon, *study for Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991, ink on book page, 11 1/2 x 11".

*Warm Broad Glow* registers a protest against such reductive formulations of post-black. It does so by reaching 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.

TWO QUESTIONS IN MAGIC MARKER: WHY ARE WE ALWAYS GREASY? and WHY ARE WE ALWAYS SHINING. With these questions, Ligon confronts the sheen of Mapplethorpe’s racialized desire, the slickness of sexual stereotype as it is projected, again and again, across the bodies of individual black men.

AS POSED BY LIGON, the question “why are we always shining?” prefigures the unnatural light of NEGRO SUNSHINE in *Warm Broad Glow*. The current moment in contemporary African-American art is sometimes 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. (Golden is also the cocurator, with Wayne Baerwaldt, of “Some Changes.”) As framed by Golden, the concept of post-black was fabulously 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.” For Golden, post-black named the push/pull effect of a 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, 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 misreading of the term as a definitive rejection of black culture and identity, and on the analogy of “post-gay” or “post-ethnic.”

*Warm Broad Glow* registers a protest against such reductive formulations of post-black. It does 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. *Warm Broad Glow* returns, most specifically, to the 1909 publication of Gertrude Stein’s novella “Melanctha.” On the first page of the story, 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 the negroes. Hers was just ordinary, any sort of woman laughter.

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 the negroes.” In such passages, Stein trafficks 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* may not recognize “negro sunshine” as a citation of Gertrude Stein. This will not, I imagine, disturb Ligon very much. Throughout his career, the artist has traced the movement of language across

why are we always greasy?



why are we always shining?

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. Ligon’s retrieval of “negro sunshine” both responds to and refuses the current fate of post-black.

According to Golden, “post-black” started as an irreverent comment, even a kind of joke, exchanged between herself and a friend. As she notes in the “Freestyle” 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.

Even as she introduces post-black into critical discourse, Golden locates it as a 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 adoption 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 black paint (or, to be precise, an industrial 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 are in fact one and the same. By partially obstructing the off-white light, the Plasti Dip creates a halo effect that heightens the visual drama of *Warm Broad Glow*. Ligon blackens language so as, once again and yet more brilliantly, to light it up. □

RICHARD MEYER IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)