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"Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions"

TATE LIVERPOOL

Lynne Cooke

WALKING INTO "Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions" at Tate Liverpool, visitors found themselves poised between Jasper Johns's 1962 lithograph *Painting with Two Balls II* and a mid-1970s David Hammons body print in which the artist's features are framed within an ace of spades. In tandem with that suggestive pairing, the first gallery contained the Cady Noland sculpture *Pipes in a Basket*, 1989, which comprises handcuffs and a small American flag alongside a handful of pipes; Kelley Walker's screen-printed painting *Black Star Press (Triptych)*, 2005, based on scanned photographs of civil rights demonstrations that he overpainted with white, milk, and dark chocolate; Hammons's sculpture *John Henry*, 1990, made of steel railroad track, stone, and human hair; Alighiero Boetti's small embroidered textile *Incontri e scontri*, 1988, whose text (translated from Italian) supplied the show's title; and an early oil-and-enamel painting on paper by Willem de Kooning, *Black Untitled*, 1948. This resonant ensemble was rounded out by two of Ligon's own Richard Pryor paintings, *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993, and *Niggers Ain't Scared*, 1996. Collectively, the works mapped key moments and issues—artistic, social, and political—in Ligon's formation and ongoing history, from his childhood in the Bronx in the '60s, through his coming-of-age in an era of civil rights struggles, to his education in the Whitney Independent Study Program, and his present-day life in Brooklyn. It also counterpointed several generations of artists, juxtaposing elders, such as Hammons and Johns, who have been significant mentors for him, with contemporaries, notably Noland and Walker, with whom he has close affinities. That almost all of the works in the modestly scaled gallery were made by his fellow citizens was also telling. Though the show was intermittently enriched by incursions from elsewhere, its purview was unmistakably the country of Ligon's birth (a focus underscored in another gallery by Ligon's *Untitled*, 2006, a monumental neon sign whose letters, painted black, spell AMERICA).

Building on that richly textured opening salvo, the show unfolded through a series of interconnected spaces in which exhibits were clustered thematically or by reference to formal or material concerns (or both). Integral to these groupings were photographs, films, and videos by William Eggleston, Charles Moore, and Agnès Varda, among others. Like many of the objects in the first gallery, these selections evoked watersheds of recent American history, providing a kind of quasi-documentary ballast throughout the exhibition. The generational admixture extended through the show, with classic works by forebears including Philip Guston, Bruce Nauman, Adrian Piper, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol installed alongside revered icons by important figures from Ligon's generation (Byron Kim, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Zoe Leonard, Steve McQueen, and Chris Ofili, among others), while a few outliers, such as Sun Ra and Beauford Delaney, leavened this pedigreed corpus. All told, "Encounters and Collisions," billed as Ligon's "first major curatorial project," brought more than forty artists into conversation and comprised some 125 works. A mere dozen, spanning the years 1985 to 2008, were by Ligon himself. Each was contextualized within a finely honed selection of works by other participants that engaged its core concerns, including

homophobia, racial stereotyping, masculinity, social justice, artistic legacy, and the problems and possibilities of expressive abstraction. The show's organizers, Tate Britain director Alex Farquharson (who initiated the show when he was director of Nottingham Contemporary) and Francesco Manacorda (artistic director at Tate Liverpool, to which it traveled) describe the exhibition in the accompanying catalogue as "a kind of retrospective, but one that takes the paradoxical form of a group exhibition—a group exhibition that traces Ligon's relationships with others"—*and* as "the realization of the imaginary museum [Ligon's] practice evokes." Vastly different, these characterizations suggest the difficulty of identifying what kind of show Ligon actually made, if not what it all added up to. What is clear is that, in forgoing an incremental career summation in favor of a network of dialogues among the artist and a panoply of interlocutors, the exhibition not only proffered an alternative to the stock model of a retrospective but also recast the prototype of an imaginary museum. More important, it suggested new answers to the question of what that speculative construct might address.

In recent decades, artist-curated shows have provided the default option for professional curators hoping to confront or at least enliven their moribund situations via recourse to various forms of institutional critique. Artists have also been invited to assume the mantle of curator in order to articulate what their official counterparts feel unqualified to express or constrained from voicing themselves, not least positions deemed too partisan or too political for comfort. But in "Encounters and Collisions," Ligon skirted questions of institutional framing and representation, concentrating instead on narrative modalities inherent in exhibition making. He thereby rejected models much favored by guest curators—notably, mining the museum and raiding the icebox, methodologies that take their names from exhibitions by Fred Wilson and Warhol, respectively. That is, Ligon neither recuperated marginalized artifacts into the institution's collection displays in order to construct a transgressive counternarrative nor contested conventional hierarchies between and within the fine and applied arts by exhuming long-forgotten or denigrated objects from deep storage. Instead, he orchestrated his high-profile cast's numerous subject positions into a richly interwoven narrative that inevitably registered as being in dialogue with the conventions of collection display but that, in its reach and diversity, was radically different from the boilerplate art-historical chronicles that generally determine such displays today.

He accomplished this feat by bringing to bear tactics he has long used in his own art. As Manacorda notes in his introductory essay, Ligon's artistic practice is "intrinsically curatorial." Whether by drawing on existing texts or by entering into dialogues with artists, writers, filmmakers,

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musicians, and others, he deploys methodologies essential to curatorial practice: research, selection, juxtaposition, framing, etc. But also fundamental to his curatorial strategy in "Encounters and Collisions" was provision for intimate engagements that, while paying due regard to the material specificity of each art object, contested the objects' assumed autonomy by placing them in a larger conceptual framework. Proceeding via a ricocheting, recursive mode of referencing, he created dense, intricate constellations. Among the memorable results was the drawing-out of latencies in works that are perennial favorites: For example, the interracial homoeroticism animating Leonard's runway photos from a Geoffrey Beene fashion show was brought to the fore by proximity to Gonzalez-Torres's oblique ode to intimacy, the paired wall clocks *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–90, even as Moore's indelible photos of the Birmingham

Charles Moore, *Alabama Fire Department Aims High-Pressure Water Hoses at Civil Rights Demonstrators, Birmingham, May 1963*, gelatin silver print, 11 × 14".

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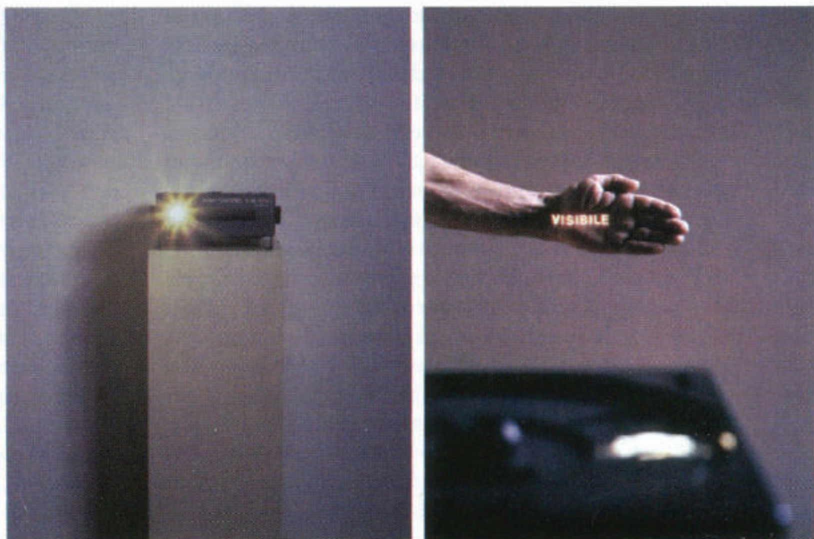
protests of 1963 suggested the histories of oppression that inflect private experience; meanwhile, the implications and stakes of performative agency in Giovanni Anselmo's signature projected-slide piece, *Invisibile*, 1971, became all the clearer when viewed alongside Leonard's, Gonzalez-Torres's, and Moore's works.

Among Ligon's own contributions to "Encounters and Collisions" were several works with texts that employ the first-person pronoun: In *Untitled (I am drawn to sleaze . . .)*, 1985, the parenthetical phrase has been handwritten across an expanse of juicy oil pigment; in *Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice)*, 1991, the text was repeatedly stenciled in oil stick onto a gessoed white ground until it became illegible; in *Study for Condition Report*, 2000, annotations identifying damage and wear are made on a photocopy of a photograph of a painting reprising the famous protest signs declaring I AM A MAN. Though all three statements might be read as subjective enunciations, the works trace Ligon's evolving responses to his salient question of address: He moves from what appears to be (but, in fact, is not) an autobiographical disclosure to more obviously appropriated statements that conjure a deeper form of social engagement as well as a negotiation of that engagement's complex mediations. That is, through the use of the shifter *I*, he used other voices to explore and test multiple facets of selfhood and to think through questions of identity by articulating experiences not necessarily lived by the artist, but imaginatively inhabited. Problematizing "issues of gender, race and social access through the delivery of his speech acts," Manacorda perceptively argues, the artist aims to change "the conditions of visibility and 'speakability' within the visual art institution and beyond."

The third characterization of "Encounters and Collisions" advanced by its organizers is perhaps the most compelling: "a kind of autobiographical art history, one that, in particular, opens up the post-war American canon to the poetics and politics of difference, especially as articulated by artists who speak from subject positions . . . variously marginalised by dominant culture." There is nonetheless something troubling in the choice of the qualifier *autobiographical*. Contrary to the anonymity that is a crucial feature of the copybook museum narrative—and that is necessarily imitated, however archly, in shows that mine the museum or raid the icebox—this show's narrative was unquestionably authored. Its signatory was not, however, the curator, nor was it the museum-mining or icebox-raiding artist, who, having commandeered the protocols of anonymity, ultimately consolidates her own status as the author who has warped, critiqued, or transgressed those protocols. In fact, the signatory was not singular but multiple—namely, the myriad voices that Ligon choreographed into a collective he might identify as his "artistic community," embodied in a particular historical place and time. Ligon's imaginary museum, then, could be read as a much-needed anticipatory model that goes beyond recuperative and inclusive gestures, which do little more than tweak the entrenched canon, to a broader rethinking of the canon's founding precepts. Thus, to the claim that "America Is Hard to See," advanced by New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in its recent collection display, "Encounters and Collisions" offered a salutary amplification: Such difficulty may be a function of vantage point and perspective, or the lack thereof.

In an interview some years back, Hilton Als suggested, after questioning Ligon about the range and compass of his forthcoming collection of writings, that the book would be about "yourself in the world." Ligon seized on Als's remark and titled the publication not *Myself in the World* (which would have confirmed Als's summation), but *Yourself in the World* (taking Als literally). At the heart of that canny shift is an overture to the reader. In "Encounters and Collisions" Ligon made the same heuristic move away from the autobiographical (the auteur) in order to invite the viewer to negotiate her place in their shared world. □

LYNNE COOKE IS SENIOR CURATOR AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



From left: **Zoe Leonard, *One Woman Looking at Another*, 1990**, gelatin silver print, 36¾ × 25¼". **Giovanni Anselmo, *Invisibile*, 1971**, projector, 35-mm slide. Installation views. Photos: Paolo Mussat Sartor.

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