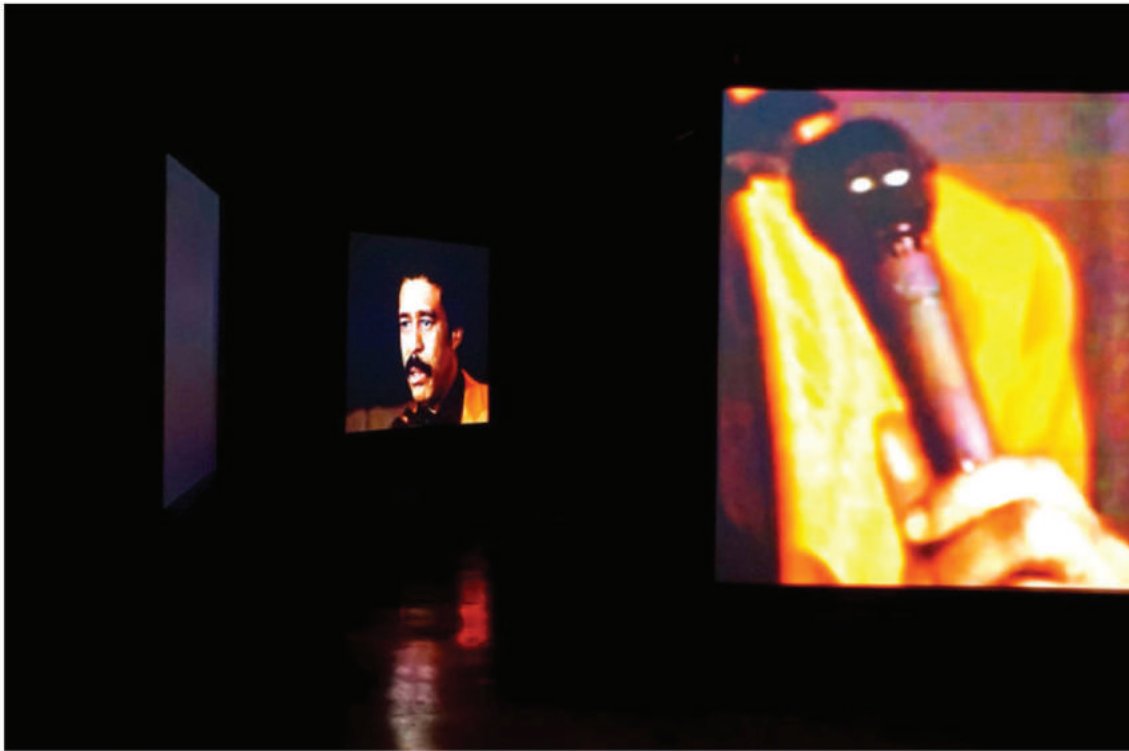


# Weekend Arts II

## Looking Anew Through a Comic's Lens

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ART  
REVIEW



Much of the art that interests me most is art that's made under pressure: social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, political. Pressure of a kind different from that required to land a gallery or make a sale.

In many cases, and for various reasons having to do with gender, race, class, sexual orientation and temperament, artists who do the sort of pressure-driven work I'm talking about are ones who stand both inside and outside the culture they're part of. Not referring to "outsider artists" per se, or to "political artists," or artists in any market-defined category. I mean artists who, no matter what their circumstances, in some fundamental way don't fit, and know it. And in ways obvious or ultra-subtle, that knowledge is the energy that shapes and spurs their work.

Glenn Ligon's exhibition "We Need to Wake Up Cause That's What Time It Is," at Luhring Augustine Bushwick, is a product of pressure doubled. Mr. Ligon's art has always been about the hard realities of race, and specifically of being a black man, in America. His show, which consists almost entirely of a multipart video installation, focuses on another artist obsessed with the same subject, the performer Richard Pryor (1940-2005), who turned the facts and fictions of American blackness and whiteness into a blistering and supersonically brilliant career-long stand-up comedy act.



Credit Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Mr. Ligon has a history with Pryor material. As a teenager in the 1970s, he was enthralled by the comedian's recordings. In the early 1990s, he made a few text paintings based on spicy quotes from Pryor routines. Nearly 100 such paintings have followed since. (There's one in the show, its hilariously murderous words unpublishable here.) In the video installation at Luhring Augustine, dated 2014, we see the performer himself in action.

The installation is based on the 1982 film "Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip," which documents an evening-length solo gig in a Hollywood theater. Visually, Mr. Pryor is a vivid presence, in a bright orange suit with a yellow flower in the breast pocket. Illuminated by a follow-spot, he prowls the stage, talking, talking, about his childhood, his sexual coming-of-age, marriage, his visit to Africa, his catastrophic encounter with drug addiction. Over and around everything, he's talking about being black and about how racism sometimes makes him so furious he can't speak.

Silence is the most immediately arresting feature of Mr. Ligon's installation, for which the soundtrack of the film has been eliminated. By watching Mr. Pryor's lips, you can make out a few words. But unless you've already seen the film intact, you can't know what the routines are about. Mr. Ligon's version, titled simply "Live," is an entirely visual experience, and a radically fragmented one, projected on several screens ranged around the gallery. On one, Mr. Pryor appears, full length, onstage; on the others, he's divided into close-ups: his mouth on one screen; his hands on another; his torso and groin isolated on a third; his shadow, cast by the spotlight, on yet another.

In the past, Mr. Ligon has repeatedly considered the black male body as a fetishized object. In a 1991 installation called "Notes on the Margins of the Black Book," he accompanied a display of Robert Mapplethorpe images of nude African-American models with commentarial texts. In 1993, he printed descriptions of himself, written by friends, on replicas of 19th century runaway-slave posters. He presents Mr. Pryor, however, without editorial filters, as a moving body, and an expressive one.



The performer's hands, isolated on a screen, have a life of their own, the long, slender fingers nervously, gracefully, twitching and fluttering, climbing the air in a kind gestural coloratura. And directly across from the image of them is the screen devoted to close-ups of Mr. Pryor's waist and crotch. Together these images seem to form a masculine versus feminine equivalent of the black-white face-off that forms the basis of his comedy. Yet the polarities of gender exist in one complicated body.

Mr. Ligon's piece is very much about complication, which may be why going-for-laugh comedy isn't primarily what comes through in his edit of the film. There's little overt mugging and clowning. For stretches, Mr. Pryor looks tired and haunted: Two years earlier, he had set himself on fire while freebasing cocaine and been badly burned, an incident that he describes at length in the film. In one clip, he appears to be weeping; in others, he looks enraged. What's going on at this point, content-wise? Are these stage emotions — part of the act — or something else?

Without words, we can't know. Their absence creates guesswork, which imposes certain pressures on a viewer, including the decision when to give up guessing and go. "Live" runs for almost an hour and a half. It takes patience to watch in full.

But hanging in has rewards. Among other things, it gives you the time to infuse it with content — emotional, spiritual, political — of your own.

Watching Mr. Pryor silently perform for you — at you — becomes disturbing: entertainment as endurance for artist and audience. There are no verbal gags to relieve tension. Simmering anger, not easy hilarity, stands out. And if Mr. Pryor's anger was strong years ago, you can imagine what it would be today, in the America of Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland, of jam-packed prisons, and permanent poverty the de facto law of the land.

What you may also come to appreciate if you linger is Mr. Ligon's role in the work, which is, above all, devotional. "Live" reminds me of an earlier multiscreen video installation by another artist, Charles Atlas, called "[Joints Array](#)." Between 1974 and 1983, Mr. Atlas

was the official filmmaker for the ever iconoclastic, never normal choreographer Merce Cunningham and shot many of his performances, including some made specifically for the camera. After Mr. Cunningham's death in 2009, Mr. Atlas gathered a series of video consisting of close-up shots of Mr. Cunningham's wrists, elbows, ankles and knees, gnarled and swollen from long use. He played the tapes on several separate monitors to create the abstract image of a body performing a dance — at once fractured and whole, synthetic and organic — that was more than dance, more like existentialist calisthenics.

Like "Live," the piece was a collaboration between artists of different talents and times, but of shared insider-outsider sensibilities. It was a tribute but also a statement about the punishing work that's required to add new kinds of motion to the world. Its rhythm, like the rhythm of Mr. Pryor's comedy and Mr. Ligon's art, is one of intense pressure and brief, never-complete release.