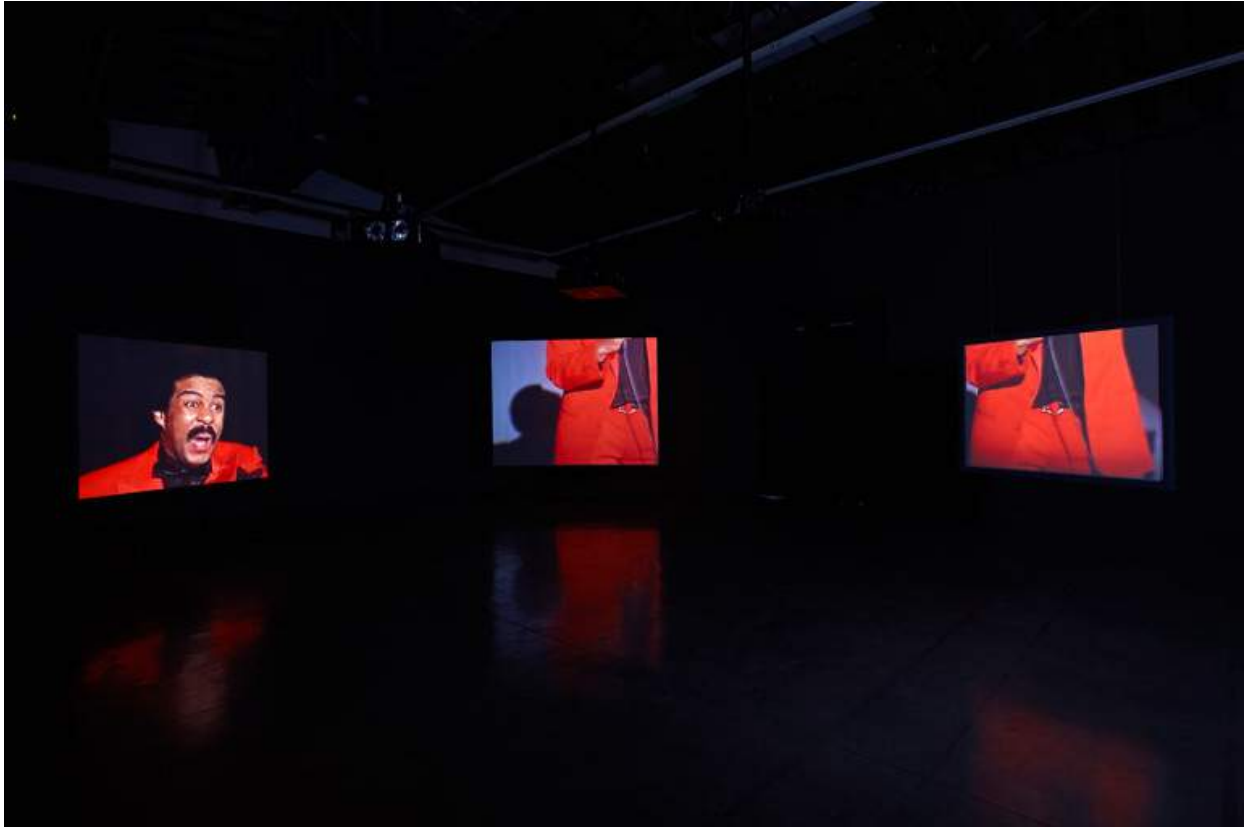


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Glenn Ligon Deconstructs Richard Pryor's Stand-Up

by [Jason Bailey](#) on [April 4, 2016](#)



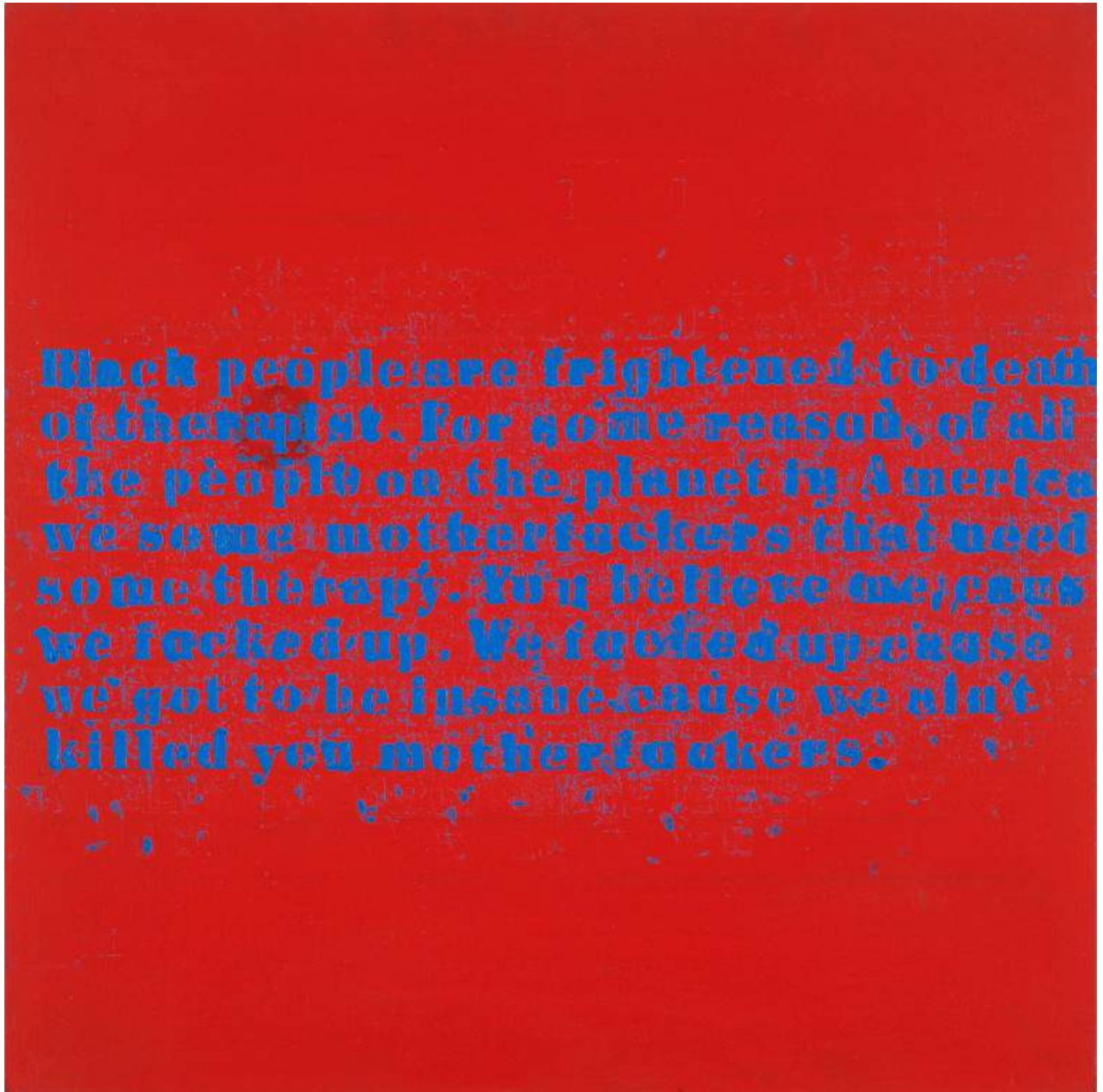
Glenn Ligon, "Live" (2014), seven-channel video, 80 min, installation view in 'Glenn Ligon: We Need To Wake Up Cause That's What Time It Is,' Luhring Augustine Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY (January 16–April 17, 2016) (photo by Farzad Owrang; © Glenn Ligon; courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London) (click to enlarge)

When [Richard Pryor](#) strode through an audience of fans and celebrities at the Hollywood Palladium on December 9, 1981, the comedian — always renowned for his candor and vulnerability — was exposed in an altogether new way. In June of the previous year, in what he initially described as an accident but later admitted was a suicide attempt, Pryor had set himself on fire while freebasing cocaine. The blaze left him covered in second- and third-degree burns, and perched precariously close to death. The shows at the Palladium were his first major stand-up appearances after the fire, the first time he would use the medium — one he'd spent over a decade helping transform into an art — to describe the day that he'd nearly ended his life. He talked about the addiction that led him to that day, the terrifying visit to death's door, the long process of recovery and rehabilitation. Those performances were recorded and edited into the 1982 concert film *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*; that film has now been transformed into the video installation "Live" (2014), the centerpiece of [Glenn Ligon's](#) exhibition [We Need To Wake Up Cause That's What Time It Is](#) at Luhring Augustine Bushwick.

The construction of "Live" is ingenious yet simple. In a large, pitch-black room, Ligon breaks down

Live on the Sunset Strip into seven images of varying size, projected onto screens and walls. Six of them, organized in a rough circle in the center of the space, are each enlarged and isolated (distorted, really) to emphasize a specific part of Pryor's image: left hand, right hand, head, mouth, groin, and shadow. A seventh image, of his full body — amounting to the original film, minus audience cutaways — is projected outside of the circle, off towards the corner, near the floor (the other six screens are hung from the ceiling, elevating his image).

Oh, and there's no sound. In perhaps the boldest and riskiest choice of the piece, Ligon silences Pryor, taking away his single most powerful weapon: his voice, that sometimes strange, sometimes smooth, often urgent vehicle of jokes, wisdom, and fury. Putting him on a stage, in front of this many people, at a moment of such vulnerability, and then robbing him of the ability to speak may well be some kind of nightmare for the comic (or, for that matter, any comic). And it's initially rather maddening; when you see someone talking, you want to hear what they're saying.



Glenn Ligon, "Therapy #2" (2004), oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in (© Glenn Ligon; courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London)

And we especially want to hear what Pryor's saying, as the stage was where he told blunt truths about himself and the world around him. The painful and often brutal honesty of his confessions felt like therapy — which is what makes "Therapy #2" (2004), the only other piece in *We Need To Wake Up*, so powerful. It also comes from Pryor — specifically, from a performance called "Therapy," recorded at the Comedy Store in October 1981 while he was workshoping material for *Sunset Strip*; it was not included in that show, and would finally surface only in 2000, on an album of outtake recordings.

"Black people are frightened to death of therapists," Pryor told his audience. "For some reason, of all the people on the planet, in America, we some motherfuckers that need some therapy. You believe me, 'cause we are *fucked up*. We fucked up 'cause we got to be insane 'cause we ain't *killed* you motherfuckers." "Therapy #2" reproduces that text, with one minor variation: on Ligon's canvas, the messily stenciled letters of the first line read "Black people are frightened to death of therapist." Which you can read as a typo, or you can read with an extra space in the middle: "Black people are frightened to death of the rapist." *SNL*'s *Celebrity Jeopardy* writers would be proud.

Yet by taking away Pryor's voice, and in the process his performance-as-therapy, Ligon does something different and altogether fascinating. "We may not be literate, but we visual than a motherfucker," Pryor jokes in *Sunset Strip*, and he was, often, quite visual; blessed with the gift of not just vocal but physical mimicry, he could become nearly anything onstage. "He personified objects, animals, people, the warring parts of his own body," wrote Pauline Kael, "even thoughts in the heads of men and women—black, white, Oriental—and he seemed to be possessed by the spirits he pulled out of himself." "Live" emphasizes that aspect of his art, showcases it by breaking it apart and reassembling it.



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and Thomas Dane Gallery, London) (click to enlarge)

For those aware of *Live on the Sunset Strip*'s complicated production history, it's particularly entertaining and enlightening. Even before Ligon got to it, the film was a patchwork, Frankensteined together from pieces of Pryor's performances on December 9 (when **he lost his footing, bombed badly**, and left the stage less than halfway into his set), December 10 (when he returned to the scene of the crime and performed a Lazarus-like act of resurrection), and the following January 5 (when he shot additional inserts and close-ups). Devoted fans say you can tell which pieces came from which performance based on the length and positioning of the handkerchief in Pryor's breast pocket; I've always been too busy listening to pay attention, so if nothing else, "Live" offers the opportunity to do that bit of forensic investigation.

But it's more thrilling to watch Pryor's disconnected parts and consider their connotations: the head that housed that bananas brain, the lithe fingers that pointed out our divergences and commonalities, the mouth that got him into so much trouble, the crotch that got him into even more.

Within the first few minutes of looking at Pryor, you find yourself drawn into Ligon's technique. There are times in the film when the comedian is offscreen, long-shots and audience reactions, and in those moments, the installation goes pitch black, no image at all, just a dark room. And then, suddenly, three or four discrete blasts of light will erupt, perhaps in front of you, perhaps over your shoulder, almost an assault. The focus shifts from Pryor to the work itself, to the rhythms (or lack of them) in its cutting patterns, the organization of the screens, its compartmentalization of the comedian's body in ways both organic and unexpected.



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And this is around the point when you might realize that you can look at "Live" in any way you'd like. The architecture and organization is such that you're instinctively drawn to the center of the room, the middle of the circle, so you can turn and catch new images hitting the screens and walls around you. But you don't have to be there; the translucent screens are situated in such a way that you can move freely behind them, circling around the circle, realigning the screens and their relationship to each other. The longer you're in that room, the more time you spend with "Live," the more forceful yet

elusive it becomes: it's about an artist, but you can't pin him down. Every time you look at him, he's become something else.

Glenn Ligon: We Need To Wake Up Cause That's What Time It Is *continues at Luhring Augustine Bushwick (25 Knickerbocker Ave, Brooklyn) through April 17.*