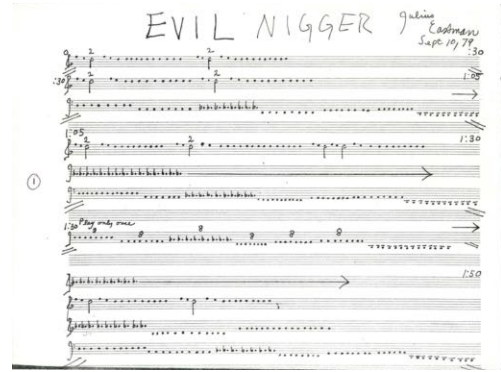


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Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*

January 24-March 22, 2025
52 Walker Street, New York



Julius Eastman, *Evil Nigger*, 1979.
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The reason I use that particular word is because for me it has what I call a basic-ness about it. That is to say, I feel that, in any case, the first niggers were of course field niggers. Upon that is really the basis of what I call the American economic system. ... What I mean by niggers is that thing which is fundamental ... and eschews that thing which is superficial.

-Julius Eastman, spoken introduction to the Northwestern University Concert, January 16, 1980

52 Walker is pleased to announce its fourteenth exhibition, pairing works by experimental composer and musician Julius Eastman (1940-1990) and celebrated New York-based artist Glenn Ligon (b. 1960). This presentation is conceived in close partnership with Eastman's estate.

The exhibition draws on Eastman and Ligon's complementary interests in authorial voice, dwelling in particular on the perilous slippage of context and intent that occurs when language is transmitted and received. The show is titled *Evil Nigger* after an important 1979 composition by Eastman, who was known to give his pieces intentionally challenging names in part as a reflection of how he felt the world viewed him as a gay black man. Eastman wielded these titles as an act of self-empowerment rather than self-denigration, reclaiming the very use of language itself. The transformative power of notation—in musical, literary, and artistic forms—emerges as a prominent theme throughout the show; the works on view, which include paintings and neon works by Ligon as well as an edition and a sound installation based on Eastman's compositions, span a wide range of mediums and move across various visual and aural manifestations. Grounded in Eastman's and Ligon's affinities as artists and individuals, the exhibition highlights their shared ability to derive meaning from strategies of repetition, erasure, improvisation, and translation.

Centrally positioned in the gallery is an installation of four pianos comprising three self-playing Yamaha Disklaviers and one antique Weber. The three Yamahas will play a performance of *Evil Nigger* every hour during the run of the show, while the Weber—from the same manufacturer as Eastman's childhood and family piano, and also the composer's lifelong instrument of choice—remains silent. The titular composition possesses an unconventional time structure and open score; it places crucial artistic decisions, including pitch, octave, and even instrumentation, in the performers' hands. Also on view is a multipart print based on the score to *Thruway* (1970), the final work in Eastman's oeuvre to remain unpublished as a playable score. Notably, although Eastman was evicted from his New York apartment in the early 1980s, losing his archive and possessions in the process, he was able to salvage his xeroxed copies of the original manuscript to *Thruway*. For the next decade, Eastman kept the score with him, and it was found at the end of his life. Due to the composer's method of writing in an esoteric, visually abstract shorthand that could only be fully understood by his performers—with whom he worked extremely closely and engaged in complex musicological discussions—the potential for *Thruway* to ever be successfully played again vanished with Eastman's passing. The remaining score functions as a kind of lost-language cipher, full of interpretive potential.

A new freestanding neon sculpture by Ligon centers on the onomatopoeic *Sth*—the opening word of Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz*—which represents the sound of sucking teeth, a crosscultural expression that has become closely associated with the global black diaspora. The neon lights that make up this work are shaped after Morrison's own handwriting from the original manuscript of *Jazz*, thus positioning her as a conceptual kind of conductor who orchestrates both this installation and the works in the exhibition as a whole.

In *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, another new installation by Ligon, multiple instances of the word *Speak* are rendered in neon letters and mounted across one wall of the gallery where they blink on and off, or “play,” in time with the score to Eastman's 1981 solo vocal improvisation *Prelude to The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, which similarly asks the performer to repeat the phrases “speak” and “speak boldly.” Here, Ligon has muted the neon words with black paint, expanding upon Eastman's musings on voice, visibility, and lack thereof.

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger* is curated by Ebony L. Haynes and presented by 52 Walker. A zine published by Haynes & Homer Press will be released to accompany the exhibition.

Trailblazing composer and musician **Julius Eastman** bridged the divide between uptown and downtown musical scenes, producing an inimitable body of experimental work that calls for an expansive and radically intersectional understanding of the human spirit.

Born in New York, Eastman graduated with a diploma in composition from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia in 1963. In 1969, he joined the prestigious Creative Associates fellowship program at the University at Buffalo, where he would go on to become a music instructor in 1970. Eastman composed at least fifteen pieces during this time, joined composer Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble in 1970, and made his New York Philharmonic performing debut in 1972. In 1973, Eastman was nominated for a Grammy Award for his vocal performance on a remastered recording of Peter Maxwell Davies's opus *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), arguably marking the pinnacle of his critical reputation as a performer of unmatched versatility and presence. In 1976, following a notable falling out with John Cage, Eastman moved to New York City, where he would work for the rest of his life. He cemented his reputation as a provocateur in 1980 when he performed three major compositions—titled *Evil Nigger*, *Crazy Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*—at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. In the early 1980s, Eastman was evicted from his East Village apartment, losing all of his musical scores and tapes in the process. By the end of the decade, his whereabouts had become almost entirely unknown, and he died alone in Buffalo in May 1990.

Since then, a resurgence of interest in Eastman's life and work has led to a belated reconsideration of the composer's crucial position in the canon of twentieth-century music. In 2005, New World Records released *Unjust Malaise*, an acclaimed three-disc set of Eastman's works. In 2017, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Dustin Hurt curated the exhibition and concert series *Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental*, organized by the Slought Foundation, Philadelphia, and The Kitchen, New York. Recent programs featuring Eastman's work have been staged worldwide by the Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection, Paris (2021); New York Philharmonic (2022); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2023); The 92nd Street Y, New York (2023); and Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2024), among others.

American artist, writer, and curator **Glenn Ligon**'s multidisciplinary conceptual practice plumbs themes of identity, culture, and the construction of race. Often rendered in materials such as neon, oil stick, and coal dust, and employing material methods of layering and obfuscation, his incisive text-based works probe the structures of power that undergird past and present society alike.

Born in New York, Ligon earned his BA from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, in 1982, and attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York, in 1985. Ligon's first solo presentation was at the Davison Art Center at Wesleyan in 1982. In 2011, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, presented the major midcareer retrospective *Glenn Ligon: America*. The solo exhibition *Glenn Ligon: All Over the Place* is currently on view at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, through March 2, 2025. Ligon is represented by Hauser & Wirth and Thomas Dane Gallery. The artist lives and works in New York.

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