

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

Glenn Ligon

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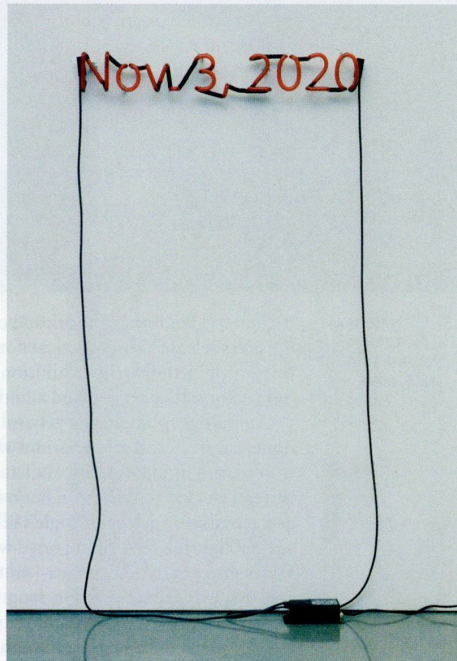
Throughout his career, Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke and wrote about his search for the "elsewhere," which he defined as an alternative to the "anthropologically mutated" West. Indeed, his unfinished five-part film *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*—which was to be shot in the late 1960s in Africa, India, Latin America, the Arab world, and "the black ghettos" of the United States—would have attempted a revolutionary and anticapitalist political positioning of the real. Glenn Ligon takes on Pasolini's mode of postcolonial, essayistic storytelling in his sculpture *Notes for a Poem on the Third World (chapter one)* (all works 2018), a neon sculpture of two hands, which was one of eleven new works included in this exhibition. The stark black outline of the open hands, with their steady white glow, seems both welcoming and capitulating, evoking the "hands in the air" party gesture as much as the "hands up, don't shoot" protest.

The first in an ongoing, five-part series (and Ligon's debut figurative neon sculpture), *Notes for a Poem on the Third World (chapter one)* captures the crux of the present moment, meditating on the refugee crisis, police shootings, and the "genius" of the artist's hand. And

though what the artist truly thinks about Pasolini's unapologetic ethnographic incursions into Third World territories remains unclear, the pleasure Ligon takes in engaging with Pasolini was completely perceptible, as was the depth of his research into literature, language, and art. The seven paintings from the ongoing series "Debris Field," for example, built on the artist's signature text-based paintings, combining silk-screen techniques and additive painting processes with charged fields of red. Towering nearly ten feet tall, these formally tight and sophisticated canvases were completely illegible, with letters upturned, inverted, erased, and layered. Alphabet soup. As the artist explained, the piercing red was inspired in part by Warhol's '60s "Death and Disaster" paintings as well as by the cover of the 1973 book *The Fall of America* by Elijah Muhammad, the former leader of the Nation of Islam. Again, Ligon lifted a source to loosen meaning, destabilize authorship, and abstract a reality that is already an abstraction.

If there was one idea that this show laid bare, it was the illegibility of the present, with its willful manufacturing of nonmeaning. We need look no further than network-television news to find the high-postmodern rift between the fake and the real and its apotheosis as political theater. Cutting to the heart of this matter was Ligon's sculpture *Synecdoche (For Byron Kim)*, a neon wall piece reading NOV 3 2020, the date of the next US presidential election, and the only date on which the work is to be illuminated. Part appropriation, part homage, the work referred to Kim's *Synecdoche*, 1991—comprising more than four hundred painted panels of skin tones—and recalled On Kawara's date paintings, while simply and efficiently conjuring all the machinations of a divided country. A literal flash point, this work, like so much of Ligon's expertly executed art, hinges on uniquely American political, economic, and racial phenomena—or, rather, on the anthropological mutations of the West.

—Catherine Taft



Glenn Ligon, *Synecdoche (For Byron Kim)*, 2018, neon, 5 x 30¼".