

Hannaham, James. "Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon." *4Columns* (March 7, 2025) [ill.] [online]

4Columns

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon

James Hannaham

*52 Walker's cross-generational pairing of the composer and the visual artist
defies easy interpretations.*

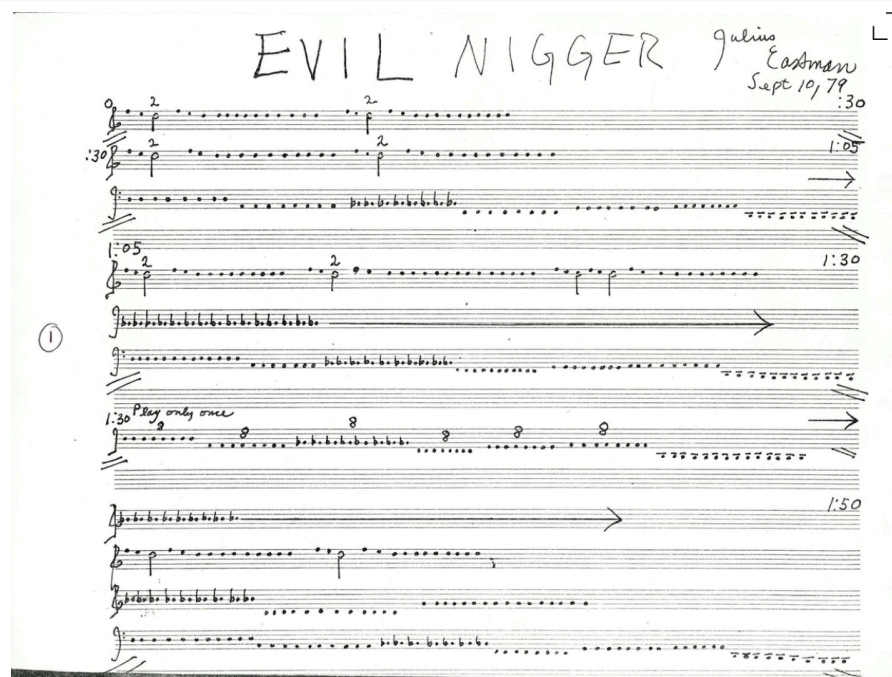


Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, far left: Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, 2024.

*Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger, curated by Ebony L. Haynes,
52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, New York City, through March 22, 2025*

. . .

First there's the matter of the title. Nigger warning—excuse me, *trigger* warning: if the N-word categorically offends you, there's little chance that an art show called *Evil Nigger* will flip your feelings. Even if you're not uncomfortable with the title, it's still likely to spoil your ability to (a) casually praise and promote the show in cocktail conversations; (b) admit to liking it by name, even privately. Not even when one of this two-hander's anchor stores is one of your idols, humble genius-Black queer conceptual artist Glenn Ligon, who has co-opted and reinvented such words as "America" and "negro sunshine" in numerous notable neon and coal-dust artworks.



Julius Eastman, *Evil Nigger*, 1979. Courtesy 52 Walker. © Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Eastman Music Publishing Co. (ASCAP).

The other half of this dangerous duo—and the supplier of its outrageous marquee—is the lesser-known Black gay composer Julius Eastman (1940–90), who barged into the hyper-Euro-straightman world of concert music in the 1970s, unafraid to sling around similarly provocative names —“Crazy Nigger,” “Nigger Faggot”—leading to his eventual ostracism, marginalization, and death in obscurity after struggles with mental health issues, drug abuse, homelessness, and possibly HIV. Before his downfall, however, he had studied (on full scholarship) at the Curtis Institute, performed as a pianist at Town Hall, and apprenticed with highly regarded musicians and some of the preeminent composers of his time.



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker.

His story—that of an ambitious outsider who got inside and tried to be what he was (as he put it, “Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest”), only to die early and tragically—has ironically set Eastman up for a renaissance. In the thirty-five years since his death, numerous programmers in alternative and mainstream venues in the US and abroad have “discovered,” “rediscovered,” and championed his music, despite all the potential nomenclature controversy. Led by John Adams, the Los Angeles Philharmonic actually performed *Evil Nigger* in 2018, which kind of blows the mind.



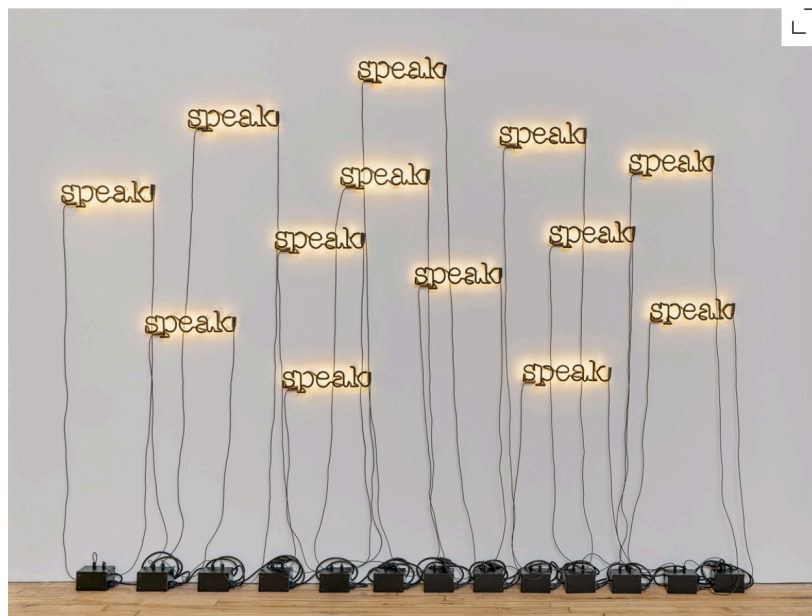
Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, right: Glenn Ligon, *Redacted #11*, 2023.

The exhibition *Evil Nigger* seems designed, in part, to further boost Eastman's reputation and its eponymous composition (though strangely only that one) by drawing in Ligon's audience and encouraging us to make connections between their work. The emphatic, brash Blackness and LGBTQIA-ness Eastman promises are a welcome contrast with our current political context, but if this show carries a political message, it's the perennial one of Black queer people—that the assertion of our existence in public space is a political statement all by itself, no matter what art we produce or what other messages we wish to (or would even prefer to!) convey. Black queer people could make balloon animals and viewers (American ones especially) would try to parse the significance of Black queer balloon animals before proposing any less lazy analysis. At any rate, being in the room with *Evil Nigger* feels like a relief from everything going on outside—not an escape so much as a stop on the underground railroad during our flight from Mar-a-Lago.



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured on back wall, left to right: Glenn Ligon, *Stranger #98*, 2023; Glenn Ligon, *Pirate #1*, 2024; Glenn Ligon, *Pirate #2*, 2024.

Along most of the walls at 52 Walker, curator Ebony L. Haynes has installed nine relatively new Ligon works, from 2023–24, plus one from 2005 and another from 2012. Most of them fit so neatly into his oeuvre that at first the room looks like a mini retrospective. Two large coal-dust and oil-stick on canvas compositions rendering unintelligible texts—*Stranger #98*, which uses James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” as its basis, and *Redacted #11* (who knows what text that is?)—mix seamlessly with Ligon’s newer approaches, like in the *Pirate* series, two mysterious collages (primarily black) made from digital prints, etching ink, and acrylics, and that, like many other Ligon works, obscure something. In this case it appears to be an image of some kind behind black paper arranged like peeling paint. The blackness/Blackness is a secret code here, deliberately frustrating easy interpretation, possibly a critique of legibility itself. The *Pirate* pieces may also have some connection to De Kooning’s painting of the same name, which Ligon has mentioned admiringly, but the link remains unclear.



Glenn Ligon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. © Glenn Ligon.

Sparse Shouts (For Julius Eastman) is an assemblage of neon signs, all of which say “speak”—there are thirteen; Ligon is probably encouraging us, and Eastman, from the grave, to speak evil. Another neon piece with the letters “STH,” repeated thrice, twice in red and once in blue, hangs on a small metal support grid in the center of the room. “STH,” the press release tells us, is the transcription of the dismissive tooth-sucking sound familiar to anyone who has a Black mother, has read the first word of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, or both, throwing yet more Black sonic shade.



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured, foreground: Julius Eastman, *Fifty-Two Niggers*, 1979/2025. Three player pianos, one piano, Mac mini, computer monitor, audio interface, audio file, MIDI cables, and extension cords.

Toward the back of the gallery, four pianos have been arranged in a semicircle. On the left are three self-playing black (Black?) Yamaha Disklavier pianos, and on the right, one antique brown Weber. Once every hour, the player-pianos erupt into Eastman's twenty-one-minute composition *Evil Nigger* (1979), a spooky (pun intended), gloomy tune, though surprisingly tonal and repetitious (i.e., listenable), featuring a creepy motif of seven descending notes that leans further toward the sounds of avant-friendly composers like Meredith Monk (with whom Eastman briefly worked) or Steve Reich than Milton Babbitt or Pierre Boulez (with whom Eastman also worked).

Eastman, in addition to bringing Black gayness where it was not welcome and paying the price, turns out to have been one of the first composers to incorporate techniques from popular and world music, which would have been a very unwelcome gesture until white composers like Philip Glass and John Adams came to prominence a few years later. (Glenn Burke comes to mind—the Black gay baseball player who popularized the high five, was ruined by his profession, and died in similar circumstances.)



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker. Pictured: Julius Eastman, *Fifty-Two Niggers*, 1979/2025 (detail).

The absence of real musicians during the performance of *Evil Nigger* heightens the fact that Eastman's ghostly presence presides over the exhibition. With no fingers pressing the keys, three black pianos frenetically trade the notes of his macabre piece, while the fourth piano—the non-black one—remains silent. I suppose we can read into that whatever we want.



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, installation view. Courtesy 52 Walker.

To further erase any barriers between the visual artist and the composer, one wall is papered with Eastman's scores and a few framed prints of them hang on that same wall. Like the strategies of several mid-twentieth-century composers, including John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, and Dieter Schnebel (another Boulez collaborator), Eastman's scores do away with traditional notation in order to highlight chance operations and encourage performers to collaborate through feeling and improvisation. In some cases, they look more like Sol LeWitt drawings (especially Cardew's) than anything designed to preserve the integrity of a piece of music for posterity.

Evil Nigger doesn't seem to mind if you think that the main reason to show these artists together has to do with their shared Black gayness, especially if that's part of what gets your ass in the room. Fine. But they come from different generations, worked in different media, and never crossed paths. Also, their careers could not have diverged more sharply, a fact that seems to suggest the culture has made significant steps toward equality, but possibly only in the visual art world. The connection stronger than identity arises from the works themselves, the way each artist uses language to reclaim the power that would otherwise be denied them as Black gay men; Eastman with good old-fashioned Richard Pryor-style epithet co-optation, a nice contrast to Ligon's cool, minimal, literary sophistication, whose sensuous surfaces draw us near and then reeducate us. Each artist plays a type of now-you-get-it, now-you-don't game with meaning, warning us against easy conclusions. Call it an evil enigma.

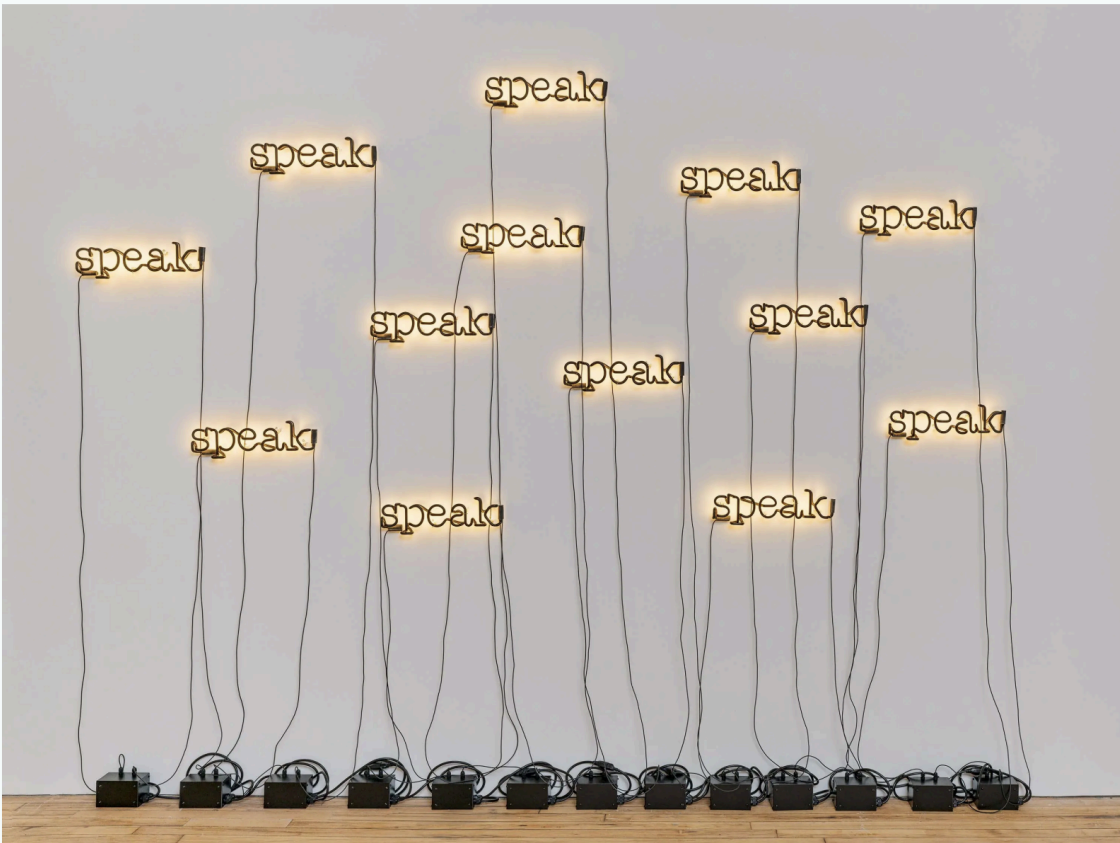
Moore, Charles. “Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*.” *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2025) [ill.] [online]



ARTSEEN | MARCH 2025

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*

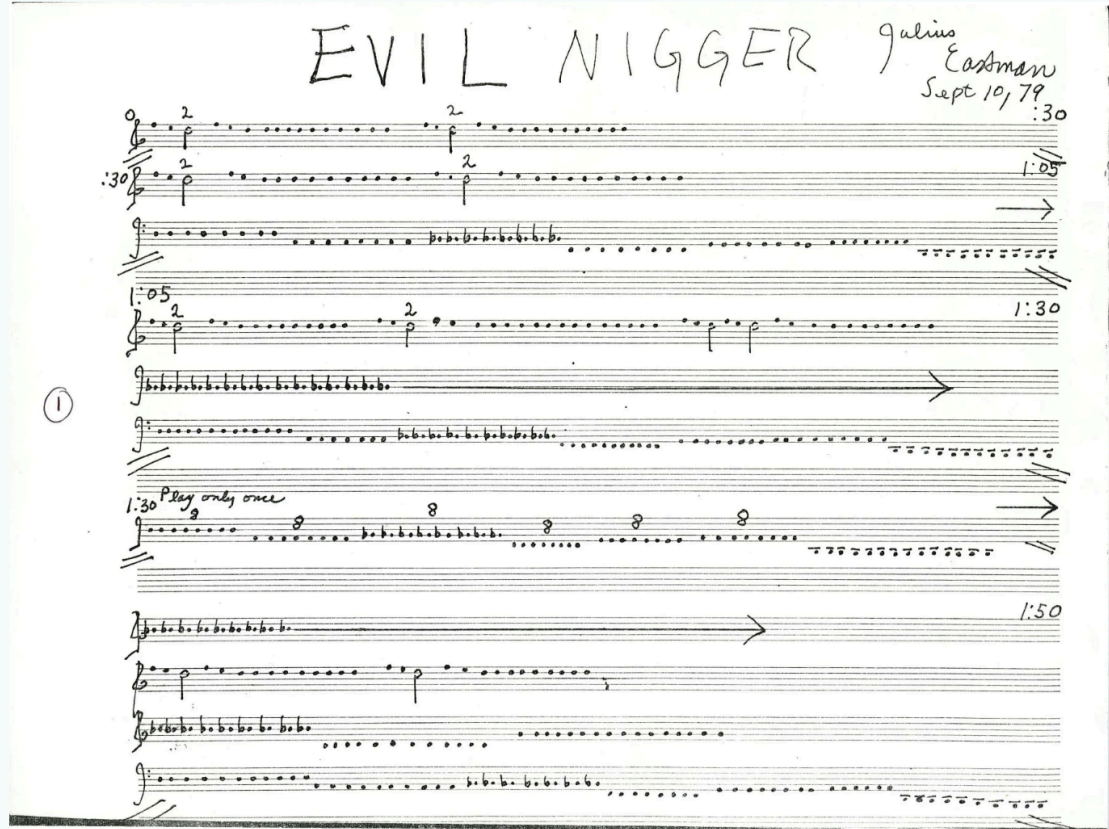
By Charles Moore



Glenn Ligon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024. Neon and paint, 79 1/2 x 140 5/8 x 2 1/8 inches. © Glenn Ligon. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

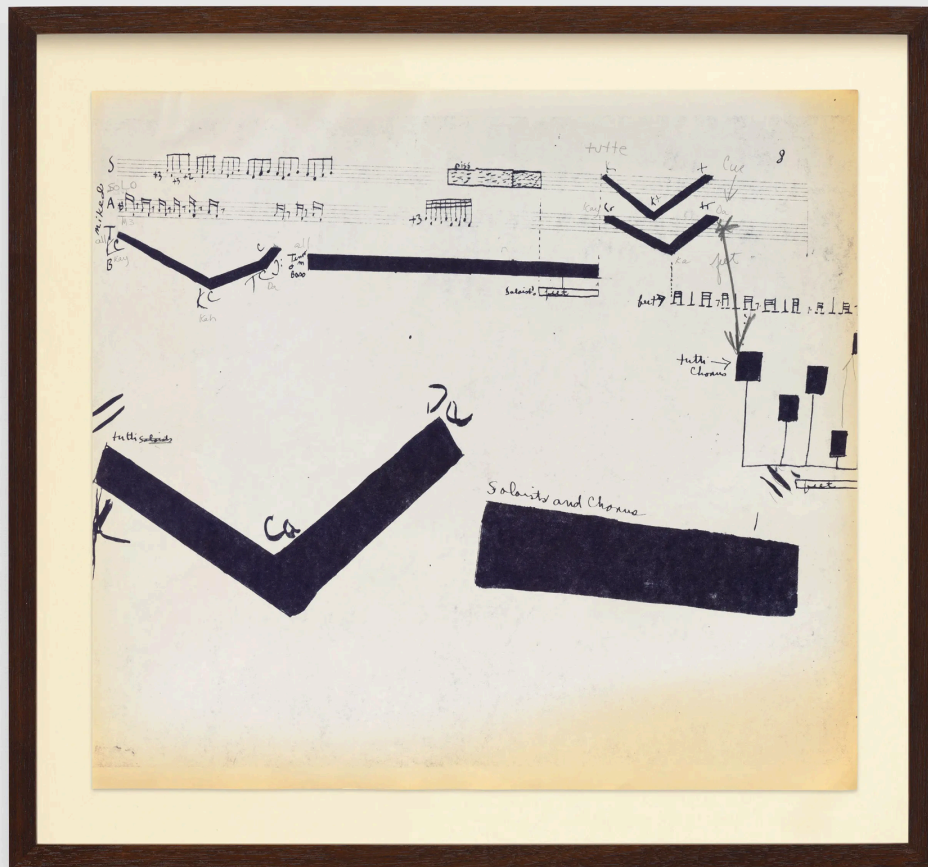
When American visual artist Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) agreed to participate in an exhibition alongside the late Julius Eastman (1940–90), he crafted *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)* (2024), an homage to the musician’s highly structured, repetitive compositions and a way to honor the conductor’s sparse instructions, which often included vague written directions (along the lines of “sparse shouts”), leaving much up for interpretation. Ligon’s installation began with a title and culminated in thirteen variations of the word “speak,” each one rendered in neon lettering and mounted on the wall, blinking in tandem with a score of Eastman’s improvised vocals playing in the background, engaging the viewer in a multisensory experience that begins frenetically and eventually softens. Structurally, the artist’s *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)* resembles the multimedia artist’s 2005 work *Untitled (negro sunshine)*, which is also featured in the show; the latter phrase, Ligon notes, has long “stuck in [his] head,” allowing him to explore the fluidity of race, putting the words “negro sunshine” on full display, steeped in neon light. And so, the viewer is forced to reckon with these words.

Evil Nigger
52 Walker
January 24–March 22, 2025
New York



Julius Eastman, *Evil Nigger*, 1979/2025. Archival digital print, 41 x 31 inches. Copyright © 2018 by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Eastman Music Publishing Co. (ASCAP).

Those aren't the only words called into question. On view at 52 Walker from January 24 through March 22, 2025, Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger* celebrates the same improvisation and chance on which Eastman founded his career. Named after his *Evil Nigger* (1979) composition, which premiered on four pianos at Northwestern University in 1980, the song opens at a rapid, entrancing pace, with a simple downward melody that repeats on a cycle throughout the piece. Playing in a minor key until about halfway through, the melody eventually shifts into all keys, moving from a tonal state into a cacophony of sound, later thinning out into a cloud before dissipating entirely. The composition is equally bold and hypnotic, hinting at certain areas of unification, only to meander in an entirely new direction. The exhibition also includes an archival digital print of Eastman's score, signed and dated, framed and positioned front and center with the composer's signature annotations, as well as a five-part print of the "Thruway" series, the composer's final work to remain unpublished as a playable score.



Julius Eastman, *Thruway Player 8*, 1970/2025. Pigment print, 19 7/8 x 22 3/4 inches. © The Estate of Julius Eastman. Courtesy the Estate of Julius Eastman and 52 Walker, New York.

Three self-playing Yamaha Disklavier pianos perform *Evil Nigger* every hour, while an antique Weber piano is positioned in the vicinity; combined, the instruments comprise a work of their own titled *Fifty-Two Niggers* (1979/2025), along with the Mac mini, audio interface, and MIDI cables and extension cords that make possible the show's auditory elements. The late Eastman, who gave his pieces controversial names to reflect the scrutiny he felt as a gay Black man, made a career of creating joy in dark times; in a like fashion, Ligon has long integrated Black culture and resilience into his visual works, noting that society remains steeped in white supremacy, and that the likes of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are not a part of our shared history but occupy center-stage in the present political climate. The artist elaborated that the name would have to spark discussion rather than stifle it, yet that there could be no posters advertising it, and that digital promotions would have to undergo careful testing to avoid being flagged as hate mail or spam. He noted that people in the art world may recognize *Evil Nigger* as the title of an Eastman composition, but the general public would likely be horrified. Yet there is so much to be horrified by nowadays, and so Ligon considered how he might weave Eastman's ideas into his own practice and challenge constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in the process.



Installation view: Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: *Evil Nigger*, 52 Walker, New York, 2025. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

Ligon calls his contributions “ham-fisted,” noting that after launching his career as an abstract expressionist, he found the vocabulary of gestural marks to be inadequate; he instead preferred to find inspiration in the texts he was reading, among them Toni Morrison’s 1992 novel *Jazz*, which inspired his freestanding neon sculpture *Untitled (America)(For Toni Morrison)* (2024), a neon-on-metal-support installation representative of the sound of sucking teeth, an expression associated with the Black diaspora. James Baldwin’s 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village,” meanwhile, published in the author’s *Notes of a Native Son*, provides the same density to which Ligon is drawn. Much of the visual artist’s work revolves around illegibility and erasure, themes central to pieces like *Stranger #98* (2023) and *Redacted #11* (2023). Both are marred with oil and coal dust, a waste product Ligon now uses as a material, the deep black eclipsing the canvases. *Untitled* (2012) showcases the word “AMERICA” in black ink, backwards and upside down on burnt paper, offering a similar sense of masking. Compelling and consistent, the artist offers the same insistence that’s long been imbued in Eastman’s work, and the pronounced contrast of the black tones and piercing neon light honors the visibility—and come-and-go relevance—of Black authors like Baldwin. Just as Eastman’s music resists easy categorization, Ligon’s works challenge the viewer to confront the fluidity of language and identity.

Charles Moore is an art historian and writer based in New York and author of the book *The Black Market: A Guide to Art Collecting*. He currently is a first-year doctoral student at Columbia University Teachers College, researching the life and career of abstract painter Ed Clark.

Tafoya, Harry. "March's Must-See Art Shows in NYC and Beyond." *PAPER Magazine* (March 4, 2025) [ill.] [online]

PAPER®

March's Must-See Art Shows in NYC and Beyond

HOME > ART > **ART**

BY HARRY TAFOYA
MAR 04, 2025



Ask anyone involved in the art world and they'll tell you honestly: it's a mess. There's a clear demand for change on every level — from how art's shown, to how it's discussed, to how it's sold. Even as artists have been made to bend over backward and emphasize again and again how Serious, Necessary, and Urgent their responses to recent disasters have been, there's a clear feeling that they're speaking to rapidly emptying rooms. The whole world is on fire and — literally and figuratively — no one seems to be buying it anymore.

This turbulence has an indirect effect on the art-going public. Small- and medium-size galleries that show remarkable work have been steadily going out of business, while the ones that remain are reaching blindly for the next best thing. A weird experience lately has been making my rounds of museums and galleries, and seeing them in accidental sync with one another. Last month all of SoHo started showing photography for some reason and this month everywhere in Chelsea has found a way to feature big, flashy colors. In tough moments, this herd mentality is understandable, but since there's no correct answer for what to do, you really might as well strike out on your own and start throwing spaghetti at the wall.

For every tasteful exhibition showcasing a proven cash cow or safely dead genius, there's multiple exhibitions of DIY absurdist boldness (Marc Kokopeli, Philip Hinge) and money-on-fire maximalism (Laura Owens, Anne Imhof) that defies conventional thinking. Far from doom and gloom, it's actually a pretty interesting time to see new shows. There's little left to lose in the face of so much loss and a number of artists are really making the most of it.

Downtown/SoHo



- Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon -*Evil N****** — 52 Walker
 - The avant-garde composer Julius Eastman was almost lost to history, but thanks to the efforts of friends and followers, he's increasingly become recognized as a genius of minimalism. His love of in-your-face titles and passages of eerie and poetic silence syncs nicely with Glenn Ligon's charged text art.

Saltz, Jerry. "See Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon." *New York Magazine* (February 24, 2025) [ill.] [online]

NEW YORK

AGENDA | 7:00 A.M.

To Do: February 26–March 12 Our biweekly guide on what to see, hear, watch, and read.

By The Editors



Photo-Illustration: Vulture; Photos: Kat Marcinowski/Netflix, Apple TV+, Kevin Mazur/Getty Images, Connie Chornuk/HBO, Elizabeth Sisson/Disney

Art

4. See Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon

An immersive and haunting pairing.

52 Walker Street; through March 22.

Curator Ebony L. Haynes gives us the late experimental composer Julius Eastman's spectral 1979 composition *Evil Nigger* for three self-playing Yamahas and one silent antique Weber along with black-and-white paintings by Glenn Ligon. Eastman's music is haunted in similar ways as Ligon's work, which is built-up layers of increasingly unreadable language.

—Jerry Saltz

Cassell, Dessane Lopez. “Double Armor: On Julius Eastman.” *The Black Embodiments Studio* (February 21, 2025) [ill.] [online]

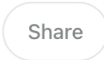


Our First Edition!

New writing from Chloë Bass, Bryn Evans, Dessane Lopez Cassell, TK Smith, & Whitney Washington



THE BLACK EMBODIMENTS STUDIO
FEB 21, 2025



Double Armor: On Julius Eastman

Dessane Lopez Cassell



Julius Eastman composing (c. 1969). Photo by Donald W. Burkhardt.

In 1979, the composer, choreographer, and performer Julius Eastman threw down a few gauntlets. In a piece for *Ear* magazine, titled “The Composer as Weakling,” [he surmised](#), “To be a composer is not enough.” In his view, “she must become an interpreter, not only of her own music and career, but also the music of her contemporaries, and give a fresh view of the known and unknown classics.” In essence, Eastman—an under-recognized titan who bridged the Uptown/Downtown, classical/contemporary music divide—was calling for artists to become full participants in their own ecosystems; to take on the work of critics, performers, composers, and scholars all at once. No more languishing in the isolation of the studio, waiting for recognition. And while the moniker of “multidisciplinary artist” abounds today, Eastman was ahead of his time in walking the walk.

That same year, Eastman released a trio of works composed for four pianos—“Gay Guerrilla,” “Crazy Nigger,” and “Evil Nigger”—today regarded as some of his greatest (and most infamous) works. Each purposely incendiary title epitomizes Eastman’s matter-of-fact style of defiant mischief. Debuting the works at Northwestern University in January 1980, [he explained](#),

The reason I use that particular word is, for me, it has what I call a basicness about it. The first niggers were, of course, field niggers. Upon that is the basis of the American economic system. Without field niggers, you wouldn’t have the great and grand economy that we have. That is what I call the *first* and *great* nigger. What I mean by nigger is, that thing which is *fundamental*.

He makes an apt point. American wealth was built on racial subjugation and chattel slavery, and their modern forms—[prison labor](#), [racist lending practices](#), the [evisceration of DEI measures](#), to name a few—continue to sustain it. Regardless of whether the word is shot out as a slur or uttered colloquially among kin (e.g. with a softer “-a”), it’s often associated with baseness, denigration. It follows then that Eastman, an out and proud gay, Black artist deeply concerned with the political and physical potential of music would combine it with “crazy” and “evil.” Each composition’s title becomes a double negative, a hyperbole that stands in for perceptions of Blackness.

Beholding “Evil Nigger” myself recently, I’m struck by what feels like the composition’s defiant heartbrokenness. It’s currently being presented as part of *Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger*, at 52 Walker in New York. A framed, blown-up copy of the score hangs opposite the gallery’s entrance, beckoning visitors in as a prelude to the exhibition’s centerpiece: a four-piano installation, three of which are self-playing and thrum with an MIDI arrangement of Eastman’s composition. While the installation itself feels like a bit of a cheap trick—heavy-handed even, as a gesture to a late musician known for having his own ghosts—it’s hard to dilute the raw power of “Evil Nigger” playing out loud at the top of every hour. The composition rips open at a blistering pace, filling the silent art space with a boisterous melancholy. Yet it’s more irreverent than despondent, pulsing as though bucking a smothering weight. As Eastman’s brother Gerry [has noted](#), “[Julius] had to have double ‘fuck you’ armor to survive.” Likewise, the critic-composer Kyle Gann has [referred](#) to Eastman’s music as “some of the most angry and physical minimalism ever made.”

“Evil Nigger” is exemplary of Eastman’s theories of “[organic](#)” [music](#), an additive process of composition, in which continually repeated ostinatos (or musical phrases) are layered over previous ones, which then eventually drop out. Its effect is almost bewitching.

Throughout its roughly twenty-two minute duration, I walk back and forth and around the installation (in part because there is no seating). I find myself thinking of the artist Jenny Odell’s writings on attention and duration. “It’s a lot like breathing,” [she explains](#). “Some kind of attention will always be present, but when we take hold of it, we have the ability to consciously direct, expand, and contract it.” Attuned to such maneuvers, my attention stretches like the tentacles of a squid, suctioning up Eastman’s deeper, more boisterous notes and pulling them close. I swallow a wave of unexpected grief. The progression tugs at me, until a well of emotion begins to seep out. Alone in the gallery on a frigid winter morning, I find myself weeping silently.

“What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest: Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, and a homosexual to the fullest,” Eastman once [remarked](#). Enveloped and overwhelmed by his expressiveness, I can’t help but smile. A catharsis I hadn’t been able to admit I’d needed rumbles out of my chest and pools at my feet.

Dessane Lopez Cassell is a New York-based writer and editor whose work focuses on the intersections of art and film. [instagram](#).

Vincler, John. "Screen Time, Supernovas, and Ghost Pianos: Our Critics on What to See Now in New York." *Cultured* (February 19, 2025) [ill.] [online]

CULTURED

Screen Time, Supernovas, and Ghost Pianos: Our Critics on What to See Now in New York

Follow our critics from Chinatown to Tribeca. Will Harrison writes about Marc Kokopeli at Reena Spaulings. John Vincler urges you to see Julius Eastman and Glenn Ligon at 52 Walker and to catch Chris Martin's show at Timothy Taylor before it closes.



Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon, "Evil N-----" (Installation View), 2025. Image courtesy of 52 Walker.

WORDS

Will Harrison

John Vincler

February 19, 2025

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon

52 Walker | 52 Walker Street

On view through March 22, 2025

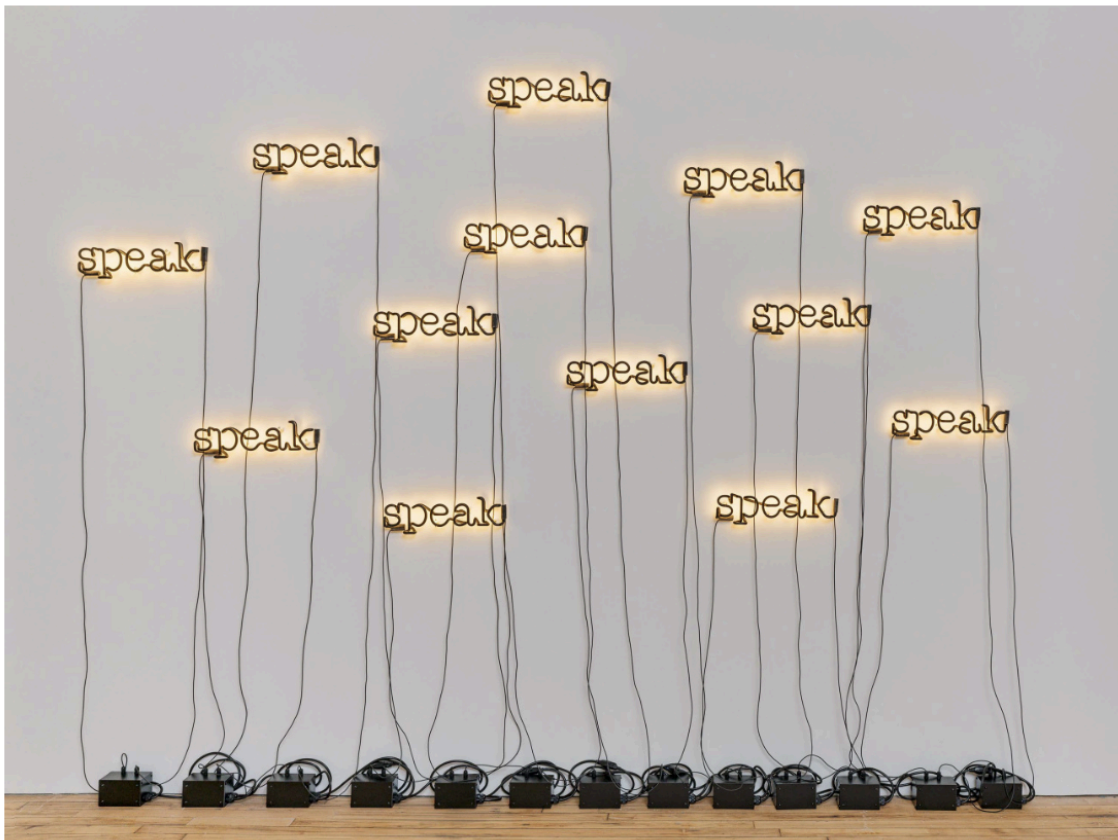
Arrive on the hour, and you'll hear the transfixing, somber post-minimalist score from which the exhibition borrows its title. Beginning with a single pulsing note, building into simple repeated motifs, and eventually cascading into moving variations, the music emanates from three self-playing Yamaha Disklavier pianos. A fourth piano, a Weber, remains silent. This model was the composer Julius Eastman's lifelong instrument of choice.

The minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich comes immediately to mind. And, like these composers, Eastman (1940–1990) oscillated between New York's Uptown and Downtown scenes. As a vocalist, pianist, and composer, he collaborated with Meredith Monk, Arthur Russell, and many others.

About the exhibition title—a note from the curator requests that "the title of the exhibition...not be censored or altered." And if it is: "It is requested that the publication note that this change is at the discretion of the publication." The show's title "Evil N-----" will not appear in full as typed from my keyboard, just as I wouldn't say the title aloud. And in making this choice, I'm outing myself as a white critic. (That I have never before had to identify myself, as such, may well be part of the point.) As I stood in the gallery enthralled by the composition playing before me, I wondered if I was unfamiliar with Eastman's oeuvre *because* he was a Black composer. When I searched my mind for connections between Blackness and minimalist music, I remembered only that Reich's seminal work, *Come Out*, from 1966, hinges on a looped bit of tape of 18-year-old Daniel Hamm, a young Black man, recounting his brutal beating at the hands of New York police in Harlem's 32nd precinct.

The greatest American contribution to the history of music is Jazz. And Jazz appears here as a silent specter. To the right of the quartet of pianos—near Glenn Ligon's work *Untitled (negro sunshine)*, 2005, which shows its title's parenthetical glowing in neon—a series of prints reproduces manuscript sheets from Eastman's final composition, *Thruway*, 1970. The first framed page provides a prompt rather than a notated score: "The players must play only the essence of Jazz. Not popular tunes... but jagged and improvisatory in nature."

Early in the 1980s, when Eastman was evicted from his New York apartment, he lost his archive and most of his belongings. Despite this, even while living on the streets, he retained a photocopy of the *Thruway* score. Curator Ebony L. Haynes's choice to display the surviving document prominently in reproduction as a work of art connects to several recent or current shows in New York that present archival material to elucidate the practices of legendary Black artists and thinkers: the recently closed Alvin Ailey show at the Whitney Museum, the current Belle Greene exhibition at The Morgan Library & Museum, and American Artist's recently-opened show at Pioneer Works, which incorporates files from Octavia E. Butler's papers, housed at the Huntington Library near Los Angeles.



Glenn Ligon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

In these other shows, the Black archive takes up space, representing the depth and breadth of achievement. But here, the trace fragments are cryptic and incomplete, gesturing at what was lost or what could have been. In this way, they recall Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*—the proposition that the lives and works of those who have been omitted from the archive must be speculatively reimagined through willful acts of recovery and research-informed invention. The whole of the exhibition at 52 Walker becomes a theater for this—in reading *Thruway*'s score, you can try to imagine hearing it.

When I arrived to see the exhibition, I thought I was going to see the latest Glenn Ligon show, but the visual artist's work plays a supporting role here, helping us to see the genius of Eastman. Ligon maps an artistic cosmology, with works like the James Baldwin-inspired oil-stick and coal-dust painting, *Stranger #98*, 2023, and *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, 2024, which reproduces and repeats, in neon, the onomatopoeic "Sth." The first word in Morrison's novel *Jazz* is really a sound—of air sucked in sharply through teeth, punctuating a moment with any number of possible, context-specific meanings. Here, Eastman is placed in a Black pantheon of figures from art and literature, and—through an act of deft and inventively bold curatorial imagining—is restored to rightful prominence. —*John Vincler*

The New York Times

52W

Diehl, Travis. "What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in February." *The New York Times* (February 13, 2025) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in February

By **Travis Diehl** and **Holland Cotter**

Published Feb. 6, 2025 Updated Feb. 13, 2025, 5:37 p.m. ET

This week in Newly Reviewed, Travis Diehl covers Glenn Ligon and Julius Eastman's music, Flint Jamison's robotics and Marc Kokopeli's unnerving TVs.

TRIBECA

Julius Eastman and Glenn Ligon

Through March 22. 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-727-1961, 52walker.com.



In the centerpiece of the show, three identical glossy black baby grands pluck out dissonant, interwoven tremolos, then crash together for a jagged riff, swelling and pounding for 22 minutes. (A fourth piano remains unplayed.) Julius Eastman, Glenn Ligon and 52 Walker; Photo by Chase Barnes

The invective of Glenn Ligon's tart neon signs — like the word "AMERICA" in reversed text as if seen from behind, or the deadpan "negro sunshine" written in white light — is a staple of the contemporary canon. Versions of both pieces are on view here, along with two new neon works that refer to the writer [Toni Morrison](#) and the experimental composer [Julius Eastman](#). They feel dutiful. The show's energy comes from Eastman, who gets co-billing with Ligon despite having died in 1990.

The show's title, which includes a racial slur, is borrowed from the title of Eastman's underground-famous 1979 composition for four pianos.

It's a blistering panegyric, and it resonates. Not only is the slur scrawled atop a framed copy of Eastman's score, but it also appears on the David Zwirner website (52 Walker is a Zwirner space), on the catalog propped on the desk and in vinyl text on the front door. Eastman's title, part of a series, remains a disorienting linguistic parry, invoking a shadowy racist stereotype, then transforming that fear into power.

The show's centerpiece is a MIDI version of Eastman's composition arranged for player pianos. At the top of the hour, three identical glossy black baby grands pluck out dissonant, interwoven tremolos, then crash together for a jagged riff, swelling and pounding for 22 minutes.

The tones are ominous and majestic. But the installation, while organic enough, doesn't quite match the intensity of Eastman's original (particularly the 1980 recording from a performance at Northwestern University), probably because player pianos don't mash their fortissimo to the point of abuse. Without flesh-and-blood performers, shouting and cuing and heaving, the 52 Walker version is miasmic and pale in comparison, like the electric tick of blinking neons.

There's a fourth baby grand, too — this one stained brown wood — with no electronics. It sits there, lid open, keys flat, faintly resonating with the other three. Maybe it's waiting for Eastman.

Nnamdie, K.O. "Coming To Voice." *Family Style* (February 6, 2025) [ill.] [online]

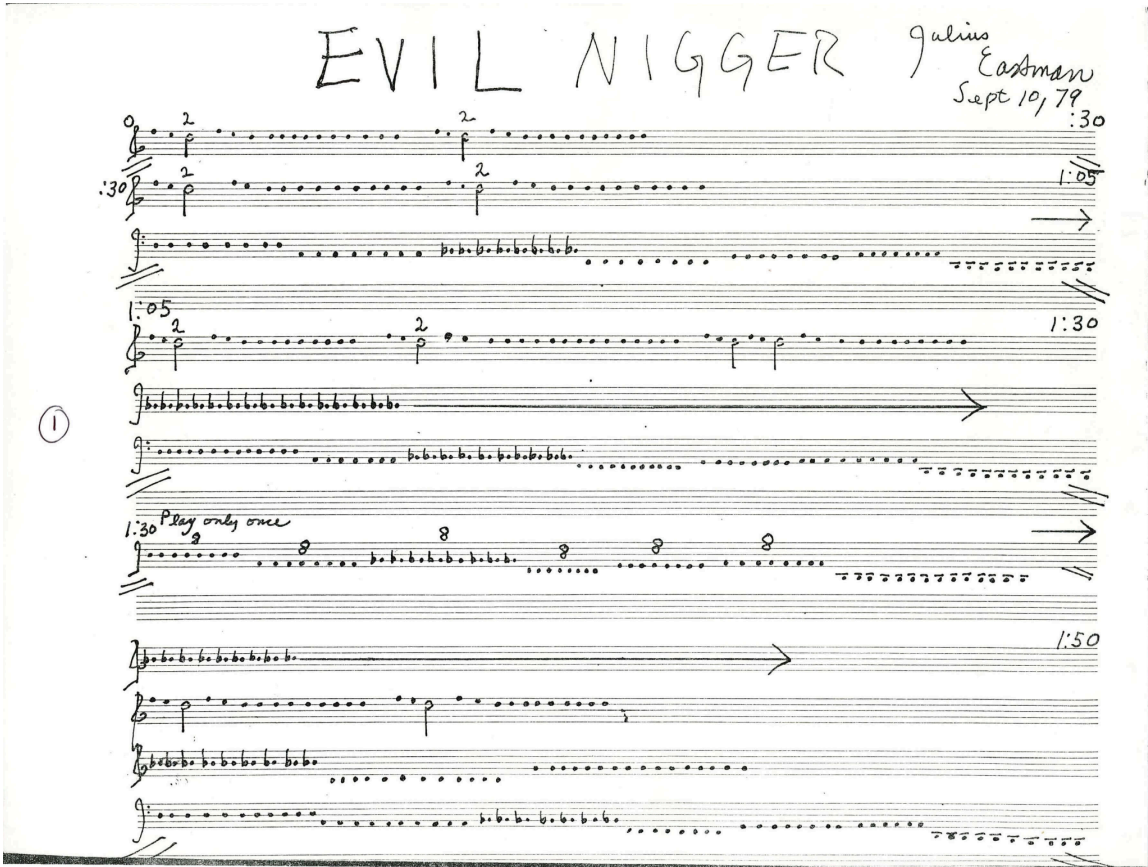
FAMILY STYLE

Art

Coming To Voice

Identity, language, and mainstream rejections converge in a powerful symphony between the works of Glenn Ligon and the late composer Julius Eastman.

Words by K.O. Nnamdie
February 6, 2025



Julius Eastman, *Evil Nigger*, 1979. Copyright © 2018 by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP) and Eastman Music Publishing Co. Image courtesy of ASCAP.

“What do you think of when you see the title ‘Evil Nigger’?” I’m asked as I walk into 52 Walker in New York. The words are emblazoned in all caps on the cover of a new zine inside the gallery at the start of its new, two-person exhibition, Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: "Evil Nigger."

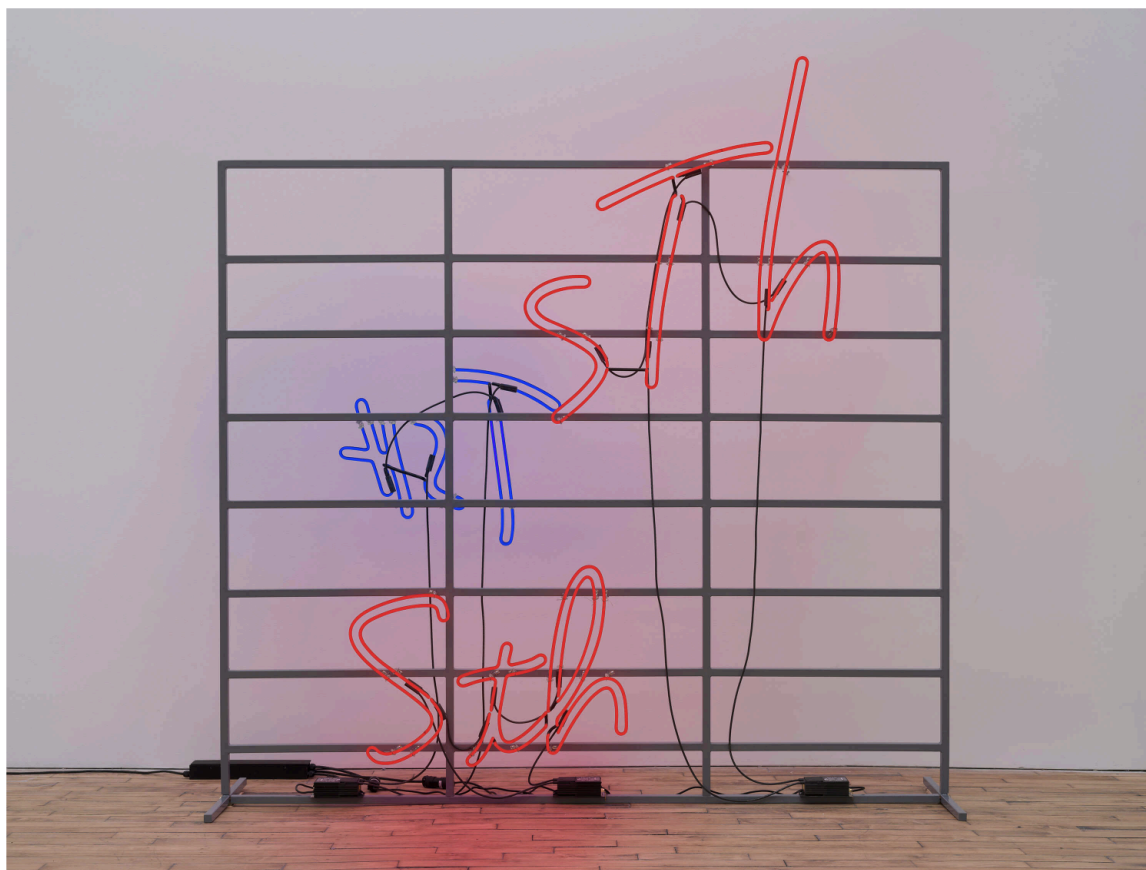
I smile now thinking of the late Pope.L's 2002 book *Hole Theory* and the connections Eastman would have probably had with it given his “The Nigger Series,” a seminal collection of works recorded around 1980. I can only imagine that Pope.L’s very response to this question might be found in his own writing: “How is one to decide how to be right within the lack of the world?”



Installation view of Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: "Evil Nigger." Image courtesy of 52 Walker.

Throughout his life, Eastman pushed past the societal limits imagined for Black Americans. The post-minimalist composer and musician from New York had created at least 15 scores by 1970 when he joined composer Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble. Two years later, he made his New York Philharmonic debut. Eastman would later cement his reputation as a provocateur when he performed three major compositions in 1980—titled “Evil Nigger,” “Crazy Nigger,” and “Gay Guerrilla”—at Northwestern University in Illinois. The same year, Eastman infamously had all his possessions harrowingly destroyed by the NYPD Housing Authority in the Lower East Side. In the decade that followed, he showcased a relentless commitment to music, which challenged both sonic and social structures before passing away in 1990, homeless, at the age of 49. Today Eastman's compositions, although not many, remain incredibly powerful.

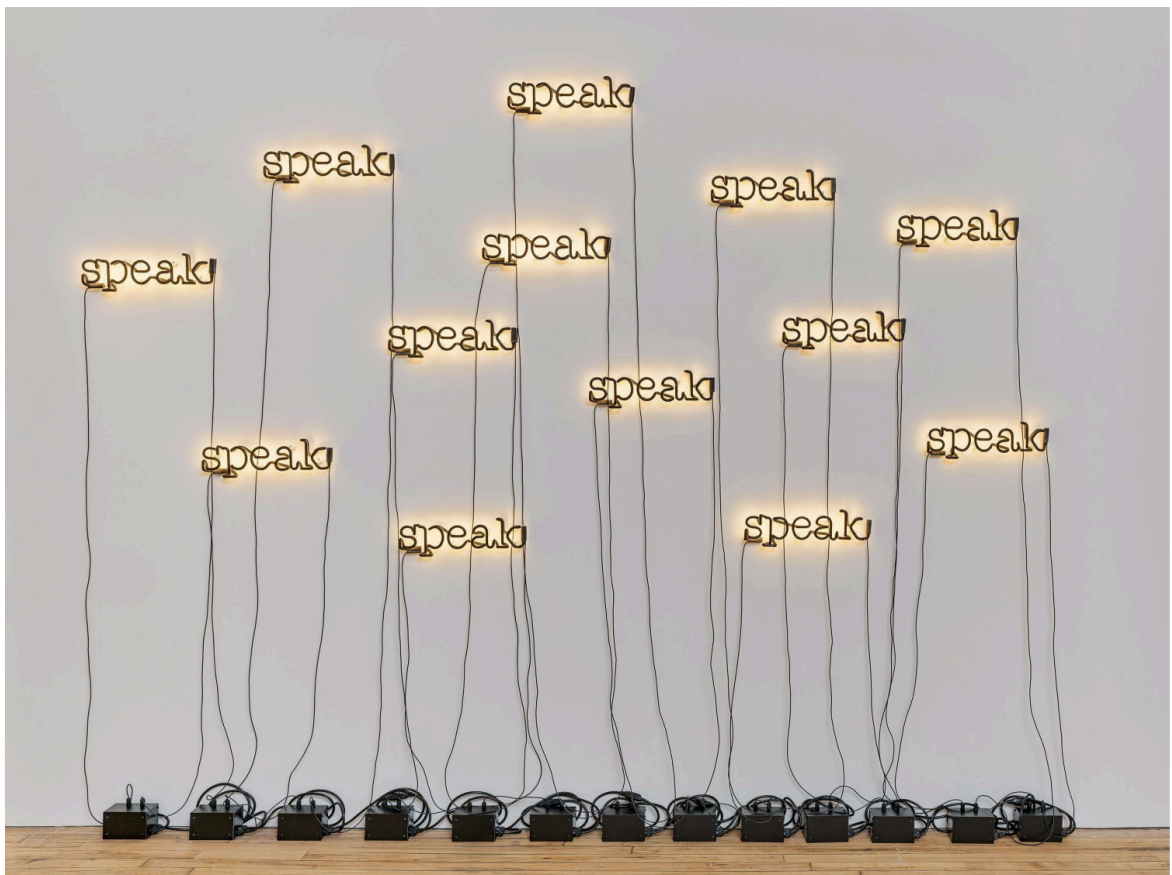
As I listen to Eastman's music emitting from self-playing pianos at 52 Walker, something arises from within me. When positioned next to new works by Ligon, another dimension of conducting becomes more clear. It's a cross-generational dialogue anchored to Eastman's aforementioned “The Nigger Series.” Says 52 Walker director, Ebony L. Haynes: “I was interested in curating something about notation, authorial voice, minimalism, translation, context. I was really thinking about the person who was creating that language and writing that score.”



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

Haynes' exhibition begins with Eastman's "Evil Nigger," 1979, a compositional work grounding the viewer, but the curator makes it clear this show is not only about sound. Ligon's standing neon work, *Untitled (America) (for Toni Morrison)*, 2025, spells out "sth tsh sth," a common teeth-sucking sound amongst African diasporas, one that can be interpreted as an audible disapproval or dismissal through the action of the tongue swiftly pulling air against the teeth. The neon's spelling is illustrated in Toni Morrison's handwriting, positioned across from the 4 pianos almost as if it is conducting Eastman's sheet music.

Another neon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024, references the composer's prayer-like a cappella interlude to his score "The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc." There is a section in Eastman's original piece in which he repeats the word "speak" 13 times. Ligon's animation blinks off and on, corresponding to the recording of Eastman singing the song. "I first became aware of Julius through musicians and thinkers like Jace Clayton and Okwui Enwezor," explains Ligon, crediting the latter for exposing him to Eastman's work firsthand in 2015. "He curated the Venice Biennale, where the Arena featured Eastman's compositions," he recalls.



Glenn Ligon, *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

The exceptional thematic and conceptual similarities between the two men is apparent throughout the show. Both artists engaged in themes of identity, language, and the rejection of mainstream norms, evident in the fact this is the first U.S. showing of Eastman's works. Ligon is now widely recognized and celebrated, but his work didn't always get the institutional recognition it deserved. This pairing poignantly draws connections between both queer men as they confront uncomfortable truths. While Ligon's work doesn't usually deal with sound and voice directly, his decision to engage with Eastman's music was a pointed one. "For queer people and for Black people, the idea of coming to voice and the many ways that can happen is so important," says the artist.

"Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger" is on view until March 22 at 52 Walker at 52 Walker Street New York, New York, 10013.

“Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger.” *Air Mail* (February 6, 2025) [ill.] [online]



The Arts Intel Report

MUSIC

Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger



Julius Eastman composing (c. 1969)

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The composer, pianist, and vocalist Julius Eastman died homeless and alone in 1990, in a hospital in Buffalo, New York. He was 49. During his short career, Eastman composed music minimalist in tone and jarring in name—as demonstrated by the title of this exhibition. In recent years, the Black, gay composer, so underappreciated while he lived, has been rediscovered. His final work to remain unpublished as a playable score will finally be presented to the public at David Zwirner’s 52 Walker gallery alongside a series of neon sculptures and paintings by Glenn Ligon. Despite working in different mediums and eras, their similar themes of identity and race form an affinity.

—*Lucy Horowitz*