

## The New School Art Collection

The New School Art Collection comprises approximately 2,000 works of postwar and contemporary art. Established in 1960 with a grant from the Albert A. List Foundation, the collection embodies the university's commitment to art, both as a means of aesthetic experimentation, as well as an agent in confronting the salient social and political issues of our time. As an invaluable resource to students and faculty, the works in the collection are installed throughout the university campus, transforming public spaces into lively forums for experiencing and examining contemporary art.

The university has a longstanding tradition of supporting the creation of new art in public spaces, beginning in 1931 with the commissioning of works in the landmarked Joseph Urban building by Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco, American artist Thomas Hart Benton, and Ecuadorian artist Camilo Egas. Extending this tradition of incorporating site-specific works of art throughout the university's public spaces, The New School Art Collection has since commissioned site-specific works by artists including Gonzalo Fonseca, Sol LeWitt, Dave Muller, Martin Puryear and Michael Van Valkenburgh, Brian Tolle, and Kara Walker.

[www.newschool.edu/artcollection](http://www.newschool.edu/artcollection)

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For additional information,  
please visit [www.veralistcenter.org](http://www.veralistcenter.org).

## Vera List Center for Art and Politics

The Vera List Center for Art and Politics is an idea incubator and a public forum for art, culture, and politics. It was established at The New School in 1992 — a time of rousing debates about freedom of speech, identity politics, and society's investment in the arts. A pioneer in the field, the center serves a critical mission: to foster a vibrant and diverse community of artists, scholars, and policy makers who take creative, intellectual, and political risks to bring about positive change.

We champion the arts as expressions of the political moments from which they emerge, and consider the intersection between art and politics the space where new forms of civic engagement must be developed. We are the only university-based institution committed exclusively to leading public research on this intersection. Through public programs and classes, prizes and fellowships, publications and exhibitions that probe some of the pressing issues of our time, we curate and support new roles for the arts and artists in advancing social justice.

[www.veralistcenter.org](http://www.veralistcenter.org)

## AICA-USA International Association of Art Critics

Headquartered in New York, AICA-USA's membership comprises the largest national section of AICA International: over four hundred distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians working throughout the United States. AICA-USA is intent on international communication, elevating the values of art criticism as a discipline. In partnership with the Vera List Center, AICA also presents annually the AICA/USA Distinguished Critic Lecture at The New School. On November 28, 2016, Negar Azimi will deliver this year's lecture.

[www.aicausa.org](http://www.aicausa.org)



The Vera List  
New School  
Art Collection  
Writing Awards  
2016–2017  
CALL FOR ENTRIES

For the 2016–2017 competition, we invite you to write a letter to an artist, in response to their work from The New School Art Collection, on display on campus.

## SUBMISSION DEADLINE:

JANUARY 17, 2017

## Awards

The Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Awards are bestowed annually to New School students for the best essays inspired by works in the university's art collection. The awards were established in 1996 by the late Vera List, a life trustee of The New School, to celebrate the creative and critical thinking of New School students, and the impact of contemporary art in The New School's academic life. They are directed by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics.

A rotating panel of judges selects the winning entries—two \$400 first-place awards and two \$200 second-place awards.

Winners are announced in The New School News and various New School blogs and social media platforms.

In a new collaboration with the U.S. chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), the winning entries are edited by a professional critic. Lilly Wei was the editor of Macushla Robinson's prize winning essay.

They will be published in next year's edition of this award poster as well as online at [veralistcenter.org](http://veralistcenter.org).

## Guidelines for Entrees

Any student currently enrolled at The New School is eligible.

Letters must not exceed 2,500 words.

All submissions must be emailed to [vlc@newschool.edu](mailto:vlc@newschool.edu) as an attachment, as a .docx or .doc file.

Please note that your submission must list your name, mailing and email addresses, phone number, university program in which you are enrolled, and your New School student ID number. Entries must be received by January 17, 2017.

## 2016–2017 Jury Members

LUIS JARAMILLO, Director of the School of Writing, Assistant Professor of Writing, MFA Creative Writing Program, The New School for Public Engagement

CARIN KUONI, Director/Curator, Vera List Center for Art and Politics

ROSEMARY O'NEILL, Associate Professor of Art History Art and Design History and Theory, Parsons School of Design

SILVIA ROCCILOLO, Curator, The New School Art Collection

WENDY S. WALTERS, Associate Professor, Literary Studies, Eugene Lang College

LILLY WEI, International Association of Art Critics

A STUDENT JURY MEMBER, to be announced

## A Conversation with Macushla Robinson, winner of the 2015-2016 Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Awards

What were your impressions of “For Comrades and Lovers” when you encountered the installation for the first time?

The work is incredibly subtle and it took a while to work itself into my consciousness, perhaps because it is so closely embedded within the architecture. So it unfolded slowly for me; the impression that it made accumulated over several viewings. I was most struck by the intensely personal nature of these words in the space: by their luminosity.

In what ways did “For Comrades and Lovers” inspire you to write a critical essay?

I have long been interested in transcription. I wrote a thesis on what I termed ‘The Erotics of Transcription’ which argued that works of transcription are about the embodied nature of language, and that they are a special form of homage. It springs from many different sources, from the tradition of illuminated manuscripts to Borges’ wonderful short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” among other things. So I already had a conceptual armature into which I could fit Ligon’s work. But what I lacked, and am still wrestling with, is an understanding of the work’s specific cultural context, in particular the black experience in America. So the work tugged at my conscience because I knew I needed to find out more about this experience and come to understand it better.

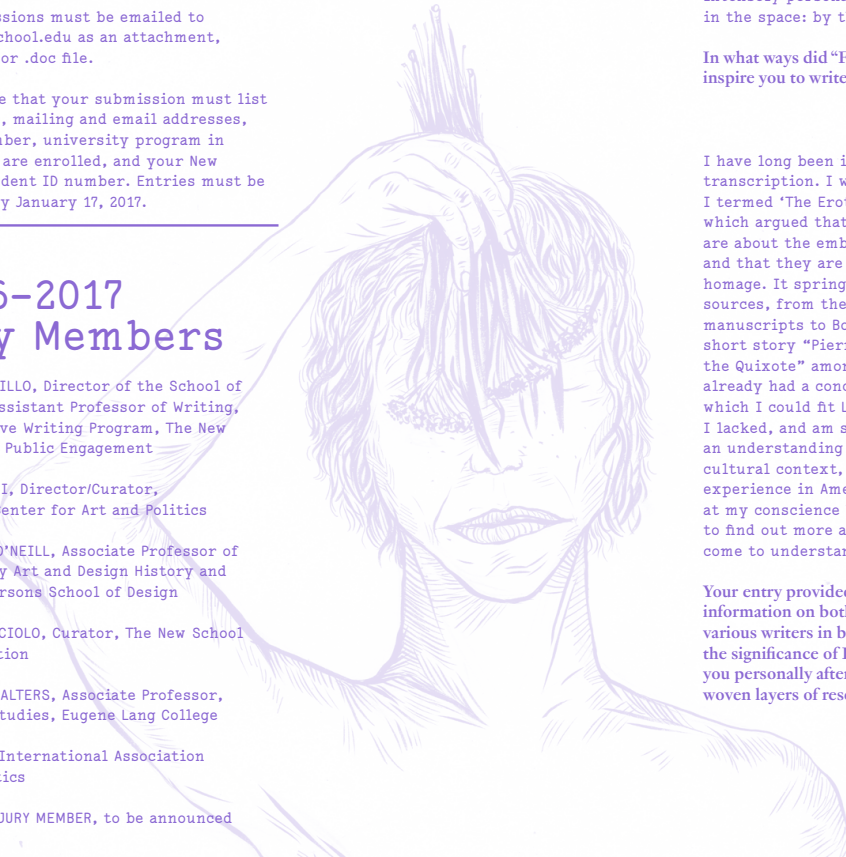
Your entry provided a great depth of contextual information on both Ligon, Whitman, and various writers in between. In what ways did the significance of Ligon’s piece transform for you personally after analyzing these intricately woven layers of research?

I had written on Ligon for a university paper, however I came to reconsider my argument in a subsequent conversation with a friend who knows far more about the tradition of African American literature than I do, Dr. Jonathan Gray. It was he who pointed out the significance of the adjacent work quoting Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which opened the work up in a different way. I understood the work as a complex form of homage, but I needed to see that in relation to the intellectual traditions of African American literature.

In your entry you discuss how Whitman’s writings are a “sort of ‘message in a bottle’ that he sent into the future.” For the next prize cycle, The Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Awards will expand on this concept by asking students to write response letters to the artists exhibited around the university. What do you feel is the importance of this exchange?

All my work as a writer and as a curator is about collapsing temporal gaps. It is this impossible task but I do it anyway. I have been deeply influenced by so many people who I will never meet, who died centuries before I was born, and I am fascinated by my debt to them, and the possibility of thinking myself into their time.

When we write books or make works of art we are imagining a future that we can’t participate in. That fascinates me. Whitman actively speculated on this future, directly addressing those readers who would live ‘a century hence.’ But every act of writing or making has this desire to go into the future built into it. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has influenced me here. In his essay from a few years back, “What is the Contemporary?,” he suggested that true contemporaries do not have to be temporally synchronous, and that being contemporary is a form of untimeliness, being slightly out of sync with one’s time. This idea of



# Only a few carols, vibrating through the air, I leave, FOR COMRADES AND LOVERS.<sup>1</sup>

## 2015–2016 Winning Entry First Prize in response to Glenn Ligon's *For Comrades and Lovers*

## To One A Century Hence— A critical essay by Macushla Robinson

*For Comrades and Lovers* (2015) is artist Glenn Ligon's largest neon installation to date. Two lines of illuminated text trace the perimeter of a two-story mezzanine area in the main building of the New School in New York City. Ligon's hand-blown glass tubes are filled with argon, which burns a striking shade of blue violet. Positioned just below the ceiling, the piece requires you to look up and to turn in a full circle to read it. It is at once discrete and monumental: each individual letter would fit into the palm of your hand, yet cumulatively the words stretch over four hundred feet.

The words that make up the work are passages that Ligon selected from the 19th century American poet Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. They include the passage that gives this installation its title:

No labor-saving machine,  
Nor discovery have I made;

Nor will I be able to leave behind me any  
wealthy bequest to found a hospital or library,

Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage,  
for America,

Nor literary success, nor intellect—  
nor book for the book-shelf;

Only a few carols, vibrating through the air,  
I leave, for comrades and lovers.<sup>2</sup>

Here Whitman juxtaposes his poetry with material indicators of success. In fact, perhaps ironically, Whitman has left millions of books for the bookshelf; *Leaves of Grass* is a classic of American literature. Now this passage drawn from it, which disavows material and institutional success, is a permanent fixture on the walls of a university. The segments of Whitman's poetry that Ligon included in this work are celebratory and sensual. Ligon includes passages in which Whitman described himself as 'the poet of the body' and he reveals in that body: 'my respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs'. Whitman's claim that he leaves only a 'few carols vibrating through the air' is contradicted by the corporeality of his own poetry, which is so much about the body. And in Ligon's rendition of it, these poems have a distinctive material presence. This materialization is a form of homage that this artist, living and working in 21st century New York, pays to a long dead poet of his city.

Ligon's work is political. An African American man, his paintings and light installations borrow from historical texts, re-situating historical voices to draw a line between the past and the present that traces the historical structures of racism. From his early text paintings *Defatted (I feel most colored when I am shown against a sharp white background)* (1990) to his most recent video installation *We need to wake up because that's what time it is* (2015), Ligon's works address complicated and painful histories of race relations in America. While *For Comrades and Lovers* is less overtly political, it is imbued with political significance because of Whitman's relationship to broad egalitarian ideals.

Ligon's appropriation of historical texts augments their meaning with the materials that he chooses to render them in. Some of his best-known works are often barely legible; he has layered literary texts over themselves until they become impossible to read. More recent works have remained decipherable; in these works he has often whittled historical texts down to a single evocative sentence. *Untitled (Negro Sunshine)* (2005) is drawn from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novella *Three Lives*. The phrase references problematic representations of African Americans as happy simpletons. It is written in typewriter font and glows a soft yellow, a warm color that sits uncomfortably alongside the dark historical connotations of the phrase itself. Other neon pieces such as *Untitled (If I Can't Have Love, I'll Take Sunshine)* (2006) are rendered in handwritten rather than typed font, linking the phrase more closely to the unique signature of a body. Ligon's ongoing use of text since the 1980s is

more than appropriation for the purposes of critique; it is also born out of a profound respect for language. He says that his works "make language into a physical thing, something that has real weight and force to it".<sup>3</sup>

As though acknowledging the temporal gaps that his works try to cross by appropriating historical texts, Ligon told those attending the unveiling of *For Comrades and Lovers* that "You never know what the future will make of your work [...] You don't even know if your work will survive you."<sup>4</sup>

One of Ligon's best-known pieces, *Untitled (I am an invisible man)* (1991), hangs in the same room as *For Comrades and Lovers*. It consists of the first page of Ralph W. Ellison's novel of the same title printed in black ink on a black page—a visual pun on the social invisibility that the text addresses.<sup>5</sup> Part of the page reads: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me". The work brings the voice of a key African American writer into play and this voice bleeds into the reading of *For Comrades and Lovers*.

It gives insight into the nature of Ligon's relationship to Whitman. Ellison wrote an essay titled *Hidden Name and Complex Fate*<sup>6</sup> which describes the kind of oblique but powerful relationship that a black man living now might have to a white man from centuries past. The story of this writer's name—Ralph Waldo Ellison after the poet, philosopher and abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson—is a personal meditation upon the dual themes of suppression of, and at the same time responsibility to, our intellectual and political forebears. Emerson was a white man of a very different era, who spoke out against slavery and yet, like all white men who have spoken for this cause, had a historically specific approach to the concept of race; it is important to remember the space of privilege from which Emerson spoke.

Ligon never directly references Ellison's essay. The proximity of Ligon's *Invisible Man* and *For Comrades and Lovers* engages a proliferating set of historical connections. Ligon tugs on many historical threads, the entanglement of which enrich the present moment. The essay offers, by way of analogy, a possible reading of his relationship with Whitman, a white American man who lived in the time of slavery. It is difficult to clearly position Whitman in regard to race; he wrote his great poem to Lincoln; his poetry in general exudes a kind of radical, inclusive empathy; he recounted how he

sheltered an escaped slave in his house for a week (a story that resonates with Ligon's print portfolio *The Runaways* (1993) which mimics bulletins describing escaped slaves). Yet Whitman's commitment to the American union was such that he would have tolerated slavery rather than see the country broken in two. He was not pro-slavery but neither can he be called an abolitionist, at least not an unconditional one.<sup>7</sup> While, as Ligon himself reflects, "Whitman wasn't bound by the prejudices of his day"<sup>8</sup> he remained, like Emerson, a "man of his time." His attitude towards race was conditioned by broader social attitudes.

Of course Emerson and Whitman knew each other. Indeed Emerson was one of Whitman's supporters, writing, in a famous letter of 1855, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career".<sup>9</sup> Their relationship was one of an older poet to a younger one—an intergenerational exchange of advice, endorsement and argument. It was the older, more sexually conservative Emerson who tried to convince Whitman to remove the sexual content from his poetry. Sex, Whitman responded, was at the core of his poems.<sup>10</sup> Indeed there is no way that one could de-eroticize Whitman's poems, which pulsate with sexual energy regardless of what they are describing. Sex infuses every moment, every encounter, every word. The erotic dimension of Whitman's poetry resonates more in our time than in Whitman's own time, when homosexuality was socially unacceptable. In our time it can be openly celebrated. Thus Whitman's poems have come into their own in a way that they never could during the poet's lifetime. Whitman seems to know his future readers.

He wrote:

I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of  
The States,

To one a century hence, or any number  
of centuries hence,

To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

When you read these, I, that was visible, am  
become invisible;

Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my  
songs, seeking me,

Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with  
you, and become your lover;

Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but  
I am now with you.<sup>11</sup>

This fragment is not included in Ligon's piece yet it could almost be the spur for the project as a whole—the call that the

contemporary artist answers 'a century hence'. Though he does not foreground his sexual identity, Ligon is gay. It is important to acknowledge that the queer reading of Ligon's work goes beyond the artist's intentions since he has never positioned himself as a queer artist; his politics do not revolve around his sexual identity. Yet it is also hard to ignore the homoeroticism embedded in Whitman's words, here emblazoned on the wall. The veiled sexual charge of Whitman's poems is a call for recognition from a time when open recognition was impossible. We might imagine Whitman's writings as a sort of "message in a bottle" that he sent into the future. Thus Ligon's illuminated transcription of Whitman's words is its own kind of letter, a response to Whitman, but one that cannot go back in time to the poet. This cerebral, elegant illumination of Whitman's text answers Whitman's call to be recognized at some fundamental level. The words do not lose their sexual charge on the wall.

Whitman projected himself into the future; he imagined himself here among us. When Ligon says that you never know what the future will make of your work, he addresses not only us but also Whitman, his eminent predecessor, reassuring him that the future has made much of his work. Ligon himself makes them concrete, in metal, glass, plaster, electrodes and ignited argon gas. Through their material illumination, Ligon crystallizes Whitman's carols into something visible, glowing high above our heads, as a testament to survival, a complex work of homage.

1. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Philadelphia: David McKay, 1890, 108.
2. University of Warwick Art Collection, *Untitled*, by Glenn Ligon, University of Warwick Art Collection, collection database. Accessed from: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/services/art/artists/glennligon/v0883> accessed on 5/23/2016.
3. The New School, Glenn Ligon *Untitled "Comrades and Lovers" at the New School*, Published on May 6, 2015, <http://blogs.newschool.edu/news/2015/06/glenn-ligon-untitled-comrades-and-lovers-at-the-new-school/>. Accessed on December 3 2015.
4. Indeed this piece does the opposite of the light work *For Comrades and Lovers*. Where the latter emits light constantly, these words are rendered in black on black—the chemical conjunction that absorbs light and reflects almost nothing back for our eyes to register.
5. Ralph W Ellison, *Hidden Name and Complex Fate*, The writer's experience, Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1964, 1-15.
6. Carl Hancock Rux et. al. *Walt Whitman: Song of Myself*, Arts, WWC, 16 November 2005. Radio.
7. Glenn Ligon, *Invisible Man* in Glenn Ligon's "For Comrades and Lovers" 2015 | A Site-Specific Commission at The New School, accessed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w48-4p08cSA>, accessed on 5/25/2016.
8. Rux et. al. *Walt Whitman: Song of Myself*, 2005.
9. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 112-12.
10. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 112.

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