

FOR COMRADES AND LOVERS

GLENN LIGON

GLENN LIGON (b. 1960, New York City)

For Comrades and Lovers, 2015

Neon, 193.8 ft. long

Permanent site-specific installation commissioned by The New School Art Collection Advisory Group

In his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, the great American poet Walt Whitman practically equated the experiment of American democracy to poetry with these words: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” and “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”

If we think of The New School as a progressive democratic experiment in its own right, historically committed to intellectual debate, sociopolitical analysis, and the creative spirit of re-invention, we can understand how fitting it is that artist Glenn Ligon has chosen quotations from *Leaves of Grass* for his permanent installation at the university. One of 11 site-specific commissions embedded in the physical, intellectual, and emotional landscape of The New School, Ligon’s work for the University Center marks a pivotal moment in the life of the university.

Installed along the perimeter of the New School’s Event Café, Ligon’s neon frieze transforms this site into a celebration of poetry that invites civic discourse, political debate, and even protest. The interplay of Whitman’s electric script and Ligon’s fluid medium encourages us to read poetic and political language not as two distinct modes of discourse but rather as a single linguistic experiment conveying the notion of progressive politics and poetry as two ways of practicing democracy. Through their close attention to words, both Whitman and Ligon aim to make society more tolerant, to help us be more present, to be more receptive to the world and its chance encounters, and to embrace change. Ligon’s installation dares us to think of ourselves as the greatest poem. It is a bold assertion—both for an artist and for an academic community—and one aligned with Whitman’s dream of equality between all people. The road to political maturity, tolerance, and freedom is paved with the struggles and victories of all those who, in their own time and place, might have uttered these deceptively simple yet powerful words, drawn from the pages of *Leaves of Grass* and both captured and liberated in neon light by Glenn Ligon: “I stand in my place with my own day here.”

—*Filip Noterdaeme*,
New School Faculty

About the artist:

Glenn Ligon has a wide-ranging multimedia art practice that encompasses painting, neon, photography, sculpture, print, installation, and video. In his work, Ligon explores history, language, and cultural identity. He is perhaps best known for his highly textured monochromatic text paintings, which draw their content from American history, popular culture, and literary works by writers such as James Baldwin, Jean Genet, Mary Shelley, and Walt Whitman.

Suggestion for reading the text: While there are many points of entry for the reading of the text in this installation, which is meant to be encountered over time, there is a particular sequence one might consider following. The sequence starts on the north wall (over the stage); the two lines on this wall represent one excerpt. From the bottom line on this wall, the eye naturally rises to the east wall, where the text starts with “Walt Whitman....” The text follows the perimeter of the room to the south wall and then to the west wall, where it is suspended. It picks up again on the east wall, on the bottom line under “Walt Whitman...” and then sweeps around the perimeter once more.